

HER  
CONVICT

M. E.  
BRADDON



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HER CONVICT

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# HER CONVICT

By

M. E. BRADDON

Author of

“Lady Audley’s Secret,”

Etc.



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KINGSTON  
SURREY

# HER CONVICT.

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## THE PROLOGUE.

FIVE YEARS BEFORE.

LORRINGFORD PLACE, the late Sir Harley Gowering's riverside house, stood high above one of the loveliest backwaters on the Upper Thames. It was a big, square, red-brick house, with stone dressings, built in the early Georgian manner, and built with a solidity that would suffice for a fortress—thick walls, deep-set windows, stone pediments on east and west front, a double flight of stone steps leading to the hall door, a tall double door, surmounted by a shell-shaped canopy of carved stone, supported upon cherubic heads.

The house was handsome, stately, commodious, a house of lofty and decorated ceilings, panelled rooms, spacious stairs and corridors; but the grounds were the glory of Lorringford. It was a place of lawns and woods, the lawns surrounding the house and sloping down to the river, the woods covering the hill behind the house and sheltering it from the outer world. A terraced walk along the ridge of hill had been a favourite resort of Sir Harley and his friends in the days when there were many visitors at Lorringford.

Sir Harley Gowering had been dead nearly five years, and Lorringford belonged to his only daughter and heiress, who had no use for it. She had married the owner of a large estate in Somersetshire, a man whose only pleasures were his gun and his yacht, and who called the place on the Thames a white elephant. The house had been shut up for two or three years, the furniture kept intact, in case the owner should take it into her head to go there; but with London in the season, and Cowes, and the autumn shooting, and the Mediterranean afterwards, there had been no time for Lorringford; so an order had been given from Corfu, where the *Titania* was stationed, and the furniture had been sold by a local auctioneer at just the very worst time of year, and a board had been put up at the gate, where a private road branched off from the public highway, announcing that the mansion and gardens and woods were to be let or sold.

So far the board had produced neither tenant nor purchaser, and in this late November the great empty house loomed darkly through the grey fog like the ghost of a house that had once been full of bright fires, and brighter faces, and happy sounds of talk and laughter.

Through the thick grey fog that hid the coach-house, and the Vicarage on the other side of the river, and the church, and the pretty red homestead above the lock, and the mill, and the three or four cottages that called themselves a village, there came the slow dipping of sculls, as a boat crept cautiously close by the bank of the backwater, under the Lorringford lawns. And presently the sound of the sculls stopped, and the boat ground against the bank, and it seemed as if the rower, invisible in the fog, was groping for some means of securing his boat. He found such means after creeping on a little farther under the steep bank. Still moving at

a snail's pace, almost noiselessly, he came to some stone steps and an iron railing, to which he tied his boat, and then went slowly up the steps and on to the neglected lawn. He was carrying a leather bag, and the way he carried it indicated that its contents were weighty.

He groped his way across the wide stretch of grass between the river and the house, having no guide but the dark mass in front of him, shapeless in the fog, only a something darker where all was dark. It was with infinite care that he made out a door in the basement, a door the house agent had told him about, leading into a hall on the ground floor. The hall proper, the hall of state, was on an upper floor, approached by the stately double flight of stone steps, fourteen feet high.

The agent had given him the key of this lower door, and after groping with his disengaged hand along the wall, he felt the damp woodwork and found the keyhole, and after some trouble succeeded in unlocking the door, which opened in a sulky way, hanging heavily on strained hinges, rusty with years of disuse.

Fog outside, black darkness within. The stranger's first act on entering was to open his leather bag and take out a box of matches and a candle in a small glass lantern. This being lighted, showed him a hall with doors opening on three sides. He stood looking about him, not with the inquiring look of a man who sees things for the first time, but with the thoughtful look of a man who remembers.

He left his bag on the floor where he had set it down in the darkness, and carried his lantern in his left hand. It was a well-made little lantern, and shot an arrow of light on whatever point he turned it. He opened the door on his right hand, and went through a stone passage into a spacious stone-floored kitchen, where the wide iron grate and yawning chimney looked like the mouth of a

cavern. Here there were three more doors, open or ajar, one leading to a servants' hall, one to a stone-paved scullery, and one through which the stranger went, opening into a windowless lobby, lighted by a skylight.

Opposite the door opening from the kitchen there was another door, heavily barred and bolted, with bolts and bars red with the rust of more years than had gone by since old Sir Harley Gowering had given up life and Lorringford Place together. The stranger examined these rusty fastenings closely, by the vivid light of his lantern, and then turned and went back to fetch his bag.

The bag was full of useful things, and among them there were tools that enabled the stranger to master the obstinate immovability of bolts and bars that had not been disturbed for many years. He had to use hammer and chisel, and a pair of pincers, and a greasy rag, before he could lift the bar from its socket, and get the better of those inexorable bolts. It was a slow business, but he made no attempt to hurry his work.

He gave a sigh of relief when the door slowly opened upon hinges that he had manipulated with his oiled rag. It opened upon a flight of steps, descending for some seven or eight feet into darkness and cold air, and the creeping damp of the fog outside the house. The bricks of which the steps were built were loose and broken here and there, and he had to go cautiously, carrying lantern and bag. He moved as one who knew where he was going.

The steps led down to a long underground passage, about seven feet high, and at least eight feet wide. The stranger moved through the black gloom with confident steps, with just that arrow of light leading him, kicking aside the rank growth of fungus that had thriven in foul damps and stagnant air, and moving steadily to a given point, where a

gap in the arched roof let in the grey mist from the river.

It was not a large opening, only just big enough for the man to put his hand through and drag down a trailing branch of bramble from the ground above. He pulled the branch through the gap and let it hang, as if for a mark. Then, still carrying his lantern, he turned back and walked slowly, with measured tread, counting every stride, to the bottom of the steps, then turned again, and counted again back to the spot where the briar hung through the gap. Here he put down his lantern, and took a note-book from his pocket, in which he wrote the number of footsteps, and other details, and then began the serious part of his business.

He did everything deliberately, whistling softly as he worked. He had no fear of interruption, for no caretaker lived in the handsome old house. Careless owners and a careless agent had left the deserted mansion to its fate. The agent opined that it would be pulled down before long, and a miniature metropolis of square, red-brick boxes would arise in its place. "Lorriford Park; picturesque villa residences, from £35 per annum."

And now the stranger emptied his bag, producing therefrom a trowel, two extra candles, a little heap of damp mortar in a piece of green baize, and a neat japanned deed-box, about fifteen inches long by eight inches wide, and about four inches deep. He stuck one of the candles in the heap of mortar and lighted it, and this, with the lantern, gave him the light he wanted for his task.

The flooring of the passage was of very old bricks, those very narrow bricks that are used in herring-bone pavement. They were, at least, as old as the house, and in the opinion of experts they may have been much older; but time had loosened their setting, and there were gaps where bricks

were wanting altogether, and places where they were broken and lay loose on the ground, among moss and fungus.

The man cleared one of these places, pushed aside the fragmentary bricks, and slowly and laboriously toiled with trowel and strong gardener's knife, digging out the slimy earth, until he had made a pit deep enough to contain the deed-box, and leave a space of three or four inches above it.

He spread his lump of mortar over the lid and sides of the box till it was completely covered, then close upon the mortar he pressed the loose earth that he had excavated, treading it down, and even hammering it, till by sheer compression he had disposed of the contents of the hole, and had made the ground fairly level—at least, showing no noticeable difference.

For the rest he told himself that fungus and moss would have grown thick over the spot before anyone was likely to explore this long disused passage which had once been used for communication between the kitchens and the dairy in the time of Sir Harley's wife, dead more than twenty years, who had made a hobby of her herd of Jersey cows and a pseudo-classical dairy.

The Jersey herd had been sold after her ladyship's death, and the dairy had fallen out of use, and the underground corridor had been almost forgotten.

The man looked at his watch after he had finished his work, and put everything back into the bag except his lantern. It was ten o'clock, nearly two hours since he had landed on the Lorriford lawn. But there was no need for hurry, and he stepped the distance again as carefully as before. That measured distance would be his only clue to the place where the box was buried.

He had done his work well, but he was not in a cheerful frame of mind, and it was a slow and sad melody that he whistled softly to himself as he

went through the great bare kitchen to the hall, where the heavy hall door opened and closed again upon reluctant hinges, and then across lawns and past neglected borders, his eyes accustomed to the river fog that had lifted somewhat since he moored his boat to the steps.

He had performed a task that had been put upon him by that chapter of accidents men call Fate—a task he hated, and which he had done in doubt and trouble of mind.

“Poor old Lorryngford,” he said to himself, as he sculled slowly towards the main stream. “To think that I was once so happy here, and that I can never be happy again !”

He delivered the key to the house agent next day.

“The house is too large, and too much out of repair to suit my friend,” he said.

“Well, it would want a good lot of money spent upon it, no doubt,” replied the agent blandly. “It’s very difficult to get a good tenant for a house of that importance, and if the rush for this part of the river goes on, I shouldn’t be surprised to see the old place taken up by a speculating builder, and turned into a little Bedford Park. A row of bungalows along that backwater would sell like smoke ; and there’d be room for half a dozen avenues of semi-detached villas at right angles with the river.”

The stranger’s pale face grew a shade whiter.

“Do you think that’s likely ?” he asked.

“Well, it would have to be an enterprising chap to build at Lorryngford yet awhile. Rather too far from London. I reckon it may be another twenty years or so before building expands in that direction. And, after all, it would be a pity to spoil that picturesque little nook, the church, and the mill, and the old farmhouse, that those painter chaps are so fond of.”

## CHAPTER I.

THE church clock struck one. Through the thin mist that hung over the moon like a ragged muslin veil the single stroke sounded with a melancholy note in the night silence.

Vera Penroyal shut her book with a startled quickness. The fire had burnt low. The room had suddenly grown cold. One o'clock! To sit there reading a very foolish novel till one o'clock, after coming upstairs two hours and a half ago!

Half-past ten was bedtime at the Vicarage; everybody's bedtime, or, rather, the maximum of waking liberty allowed to the inhabitants of that remote and solitary dwelling. The Vicar often retired before ten. The old butler brought the sacred key of the hall door into the drawing-room, and laid it by his master's empty coffee cup at half-past nine, when his wife, the cook and housekeeper, appeared, with a couple of apple-cheeked maids, whereupon the Vicar laid down book or newspaper, and opened his old-fashioned manual of family prayer.

Vera had heard those prayers ever since she could remember—old-fashioned prayers, composed by an old-fashioned bishop a hundred years before. But they were very good in their way—humble-minded supplications, breathing faith and love.

“ You are not going to sit up much longer, my dear, I hope,” the Vicar would say, as he gave his

daughter the good-night kiss ; “ and be sure you put out the lamp carefully.”

She might finish her little bit of work, or a letter she had been writing, after her father had retired ; but at half-past ten the lower part of the house must be wrapped in darkness ; and by eleven there was to be no glimmer of light anywhere except the shaded night-light in the Vicar’s room, an indulgence he gave himself as a bad sleeper, who often had need of the harmless drink that stood on the table by his bed, and to see the broad face of his old watch whereby to mark the passing of the hours. He was what is called “ hard of hearing,” and the sound of the church clock did not always acquaint him with the passage of wakeful hours.

It was the second week of October, and the nights were cold on the moor. Vera knelt down and raked the fading embers together, and put a log on the top of them, with a faint hope that it might burn.

She was ashamed of having sat so long over a story that even her untrained judgment knew to be a poor thing ; but she had wanted to know what became of all those lords and ladies, the foolish figments of the author’s fancy. Unreal as they were, she could not shut the book until she knew their fate, and so the hours had slipped past her and it was the dead middle of the night.

She stood before her glass in the dimness of a solitary candle, and took off her necklace and the brooch that fastened her lace pelerine—a tall girl, with a prettily-shaped head on a long neck, like a flower, pale gold hair in shining coils, dark grey eyes, and features finely cut in the perfect oval of a young face, across whose innocent girlishness experience had written no line, passion cast no shadow.

A moorland rose, from bud to flower, developed in solitude, the idol of an elderly father, who gave

scant expression to his idolatry, the admired of a handful of villagers. She had lived a life that would have been martyrdom to some girls, but which to her had been all sweetness. She did not even envy the reigning beauty in that foolish novel, over which she had wasted her time. She liked to read about the balls and fêtes, the endless web of frivolity, but only as she read of strange scenes and customs in savage lands, as something to wonder at.

She could read of luxury that surpassed the splendours of Imperial Rome, yet feel no discontent at her customary evening attire, the black silk frock and white lace pelerine, modestly veiling lovely shoulders, in which she went down to dinner night after night, from October to April, always neat and punctual, with due respect to the meal to which the Vicar attached considerable importance. He liked to see his daughter sitting opposite to him at the round table, with her mother's pearl necklace encircling her slim white throat, and the bright happy look that cheered and refreshed him.

Vera was putting away her necklace in the old-fashioned red morocco case, when Nick, the fox terrier, began to bark ferociously. He was a privileged dog all day, lying upon sofas, and taking all manner of liberties, but he was a watch-dog at night, chained in the yard, and the utmost Vera, who adored him, had been able to do in mitigation of this hardship was to make his kennel so comfortable that there was every reason why he should lie inside it, coiled luxuriously among the heaped-up straw, and leave the yard to look after itself.

To-night something abnormal must have roused him, for he barked persistently. A stray cow, perhaps, trying to force her way into the yard, a forlorn pig grunting outside the gate. Something there was, for Nick's impatient barking rose in a perpetual crescendo.

Vera's room was at the top of the house, a spacious, airy room, with three dormer windows overlooking the yard. She opened one of the casements and looked out. Yes, there was good reason for the terrier's excitement. There was a man in the yard, a grey man, faintly visible in the pale mists of night, a tall figure, shrinking into an angle of the fence, while Nick strained his chain to get at him.

Vera clapped her hands in a sudden excitement. The thing had happened which she had dreamt of and expected for years, which in her foolish childhood, from seven years old to fifteen, she used to long for, passionately, as the one crowning romance of the romantic moor—an escaped convict. Oh, what childish dreams she had dreamt of what she would do for him ; by what brilliant inventions she would keep his pursuers at bay, and how he would of course be innocent, the martyr of a cruel law and a blundering judge or a pig-headed jury.

Time after time convicts had escaped, and had been, alas ! almost invariably caught and taken back to a more galling captivity ; but never had a fugitive sought for refuge at the Vicarage. She had heard the report of guns far away in the thickness of night, and had known that the human animal was being hunted, more savagely perhaps than ever fox or stag was hunted over that wild moor.

“ Oh, father, I hope the poor wretch will get away—if he isn’t a murderer,” she used to say, listening with strained ears to those distant guns.

She drew the line at murderers. They who had been merciless to their victims deserved no mercy.

And now this long-expected crisis had come. The grey man was there, waiting for her to help him, and the grey man could have come from nowhere but Prince Town.

In all the innocent fearlessness of youth she wrapped a little fleecy shawl round her shoulders,

and ran lightly downstairs, opened the yard door, and went out to the man she felt herself predestined to save.

She had little fear of being overheard. The Vicar was unmistakably deaf, although euphemistically described as "hard of hearing." Bates, the butler, and his wife slept on the other side of the house; and the two apple-cheeked maids were sleepers who required all manner of severe treatment, even, as a last extremity, some "cold pig" to get them up of a morning. Slight shocks of earthquake might come and go, and leave them slumbering.

In any case, Vera's first business was to silence the terrier. She patted and scolded him, unfastened his chain, and took him up in her arms, growling and struggling.

"Wait," she said to the man, "wait, and I'll bring you some food."

Not for worlds would she have lost her convict. She trembled lest he should slip through her fingers; but the dog had to be disposed of, for while tremendous at barking, he was not incapable of biting; and certain sufferers had pronounced his bite considerably worse than his bark. She carried him up to her room, still struggling, and keeping up a suppressed growling all the way. On being admitted to that sanctuary, he immediately jumped upon the bed, wagging his tail vehemently. This was the most audacious act of rebellion, for which he was always scolded, and always forgiven.

"Bad dog!" said Vera severely, on which he defied her, and curled himself round comfortably, intending to stay.

This was what Vera wanted. He was asleep in an instant, and she slipped noiselessly from the room, Nick disposed of for the rest of the night. She took her candle with her this time, and her first business was in the larder, where she broke a

two-pound loaf in half, and cut a large slab of cheese. She had some idea of taking a couple of Mrs. Bates's famous buns, but thought that might seem too trivial, and that her convict might laugh at her. Drink did not occur to her, till she was passing the dairy, when she went in and secured a jug of milk, and to carry this arcadian refreshment—jug, bread and cheese—was a work of some difficulty, since she had to open and shut the yard door as she went out. She left her candle in the house.

She found her convict sitting on the stone steps, his elbows on his knees, his breathing still troubled after a run that had taken all the strength out of him.

He started to his feet as Vera came down the steps, and looked up at her wonderingly.

“ You are kinder than words can say,” he said, taking the food she put into his hands, but with none of the ravenous air that she expected.

He put the bread and cheese down on the step, and took the jug from her eagerly.

“ I hope you won’t mind drinking out of the jug,” she said.

“ Mind ! ”

He was swallowing the last drops of milk. The draught was divine—a drink for the gods.

“ How good you are, dear young lady,” he gasped. “ If you knew how my throat ached for drink ! ”

“ I was afraid you might not care for milk—that you might prefer beer.”

“ It was drink I longed for—cool, delicious drink. You are an angel. I lost my way in that bewildering mist. I have been walking and running for hours, and God knows how much time I have lost. They may be close upon me. They must have found out long ago. Of course, you know where I come from.”

“ Yes, I know. I have always thought someone would come from there.”

“ You won’t give me away ? ”

She looked at him blandly, not understanding.

“ If the warders should come here presently to make inquiries, you won’t tell them I have been here ? ”

“ Why, of course not. But what are you going to do now ? ”

“ God knows ! Tramp on, I suppose, while the night lasts, and hide, if I can, in the daylight till I find a scarecrow in a field, and can change clothes with it. Not much chance for me in this rig,” he said, looking down at his prison grey.

“ I have always thought of that,” Vera said simply. “ I think I can find you some clothes. You are a little taller than my brother, but not much.”

“ Oh, you good Christian ! Will you really do this for me—just the one thing that might help me to get clear off ? ”

He spoke like a gentleman. He had dark eyes, kind and grave. He was tall and slender, two or three inches above her own five feet nine. She could see as much while they stood side by side in the grey mist. And now she had a crucial question to ask :

“ I hope you were not—in prison for murder,” she said falteringly. “ I could do nothing to help a murderer.”

“ Murder ! God forbid ! I’m afraid there’s not much use in telling you the plain truth, because I can hardly expect you to believe me. I have done nothing against the law. It was my misfortune to be mixed up with people who were associated in a great fraud, and to be condemned as an accomplice, most unjustly. Such things do happen now and then, though very few people think so.”

“ It was only robbery ? ” the girl asked searchingly.

“ Robbery on a grand scale. That’s all.”

"Then I'll get some clothes for you. I suppose you can put them on in the wood-house," pointing through the dimness. "And when you have changed your clothes I will show you a good hiding-place. It would be fatal for you to try to go farther before daylight. You would only lose yourself in the fog, and you might not be so lucky next time."

It was true. The young man looked round despairingly.

"My dear, kind young lady, there is nowhere on these premises that would serve as a hiding-place for a quarter of an hour if the men came here. They would hunt every hole and corner, shift every truss of hay or straw. I should be as safe as the fox in a furze bush when the pack are close upon him."

"I will show you a perfect hiding-place," Vera answered imperiously. "I thought it all out ages ago."

She was the most extraordinary girl. In all her proceedings she had the air of doing something that she had anticipated having to do. "Ages ago!" What could she mean by that? A wonderful girl! But an angel of light to a luckless wretch who had made a desperate bid for liberty after more than five years' penal servitude.

The clothes! A change of clothes might mean salvation. Once rid of this hideous prison garb, and clad like other men who walk at large, he might get away to London by an early train, slip through the station, his cropped head unseen under a slouched hat, and once in the wilderness of London, it would be easy to hide. He had those there, friends of happier days, who would shelter him—yes, who would give him of their best, even if they thought him guilty. That's what friendship means.

The girl was not gone more than seven or eight

minutes, while the man paced the yard softly, thinking and wondering about her. She reappeared, carrying a large bundle, a lantern, and a huge key. He relieved her first of the lantern, and then of the bundle, whereupon she showed him the garments. She had forgotten nothing—shoes, socks, a slouched felt hat, an old one of her father's. The rest of the things were her young brother's property, a youth at Oxford, whose drawers were full of discarded clothes that he thought he might want some day.

“It's a kindness for you to take them,” she said, “for they only harbour moth.”

Then she took the lantern from him and showed him the wood-house, quite a spacious and commodious retreat, where the man-of-all-work, groom and gardener, amused himself by chopping wood on wet days, of which there are many in that lofty region. She gave him the lantern, and left him to make his toilet while she strolled in the yard. She had put on her thick garden jacket, and pinned up her black silk train, careful even about details.

How strange it was that it should have come true after all, that romantic dream of her childhood, inspired by the stories she read—*Swiss Family Robinsons*, *Treasure Islands*, *Rookwoods*—tales of wrecks, adventures, highwaymen, which mixed themselves with legends of the dreadful prison nine miles from her home. Strange that her convict should have appeared at last, now that she was quite grown up, and the old romantic dreams had faded a little, and she had almost left off expecting him. Very strange that he should be exactly the kind of man she had thought of when she was twelve years old, tall and slim, with grave dark eyes, almost like Edgar Ravenswood, her favourite hero. She would have done just as much for a light-eyed, short man, but he wouldn't

have realized her vision. And innocent ! Well, of course, no convict would own his guilt ; but she thought she had recognized the accents of truth ; and the man spoke like a gentleman, which was one point better than the best of her dreams.

He came out of the wood-house presently, looking so like her Oxford brother in the fitful light of the lantern that she almost screamed.

He carried his cast-off garments in the wrapper Vera had used, and looked at her with an embarrassed air as he asked :

“ What am I to do with my prison kit ? ”

“ I’ll take it into the house presently,” Vera said. “ I can hide it somewhere, and burn it by degrees—like a body. And now come this way, please. I must show you your hiding-place.”

He followed her, deeply touched by her kindness, but doubtful if any spot she could find would harbour him if the sleuth-hounds of the prison came to search those premises, and he supposed they would search every possible hiding-place within a long range before they gave up the job.

Vera led the way through a gate into a shrubbery. He could just make out glistening holly hedges, strange forms of clipped yew, and sweet odours of autumn flowers told him that he was walking between garden borders. That scent of flowers was too much for him. He threw himself on the ground and grovelled amongst wet grass and dripping plants, burying his face in a cluster of tobacco blossom, revelling in delicious odour.

“ Forgive me,” he said, as he sprang to his feet ; “ I have not seen a flower for more than five years.”

“ Poor thing ! And perhaps you love flowers almost as well as I do.”

“ Almost,” he said, smiling as he echoed her word.

“ I don’t think men are ever quite as fond of

flowers as women are. Take care. Here's another gate, and now we are in the churchyard."

"Are you going to hide me in a new-made grave? It won't be half a bad place, perhaps."

"No. I am going to hide you in the church. The church is kept locked, and the key is always at the Vicarage. If those wretches should come here before the morning, they wouldn't look for you in the church. They would be told that the door hadn't been unlocked since Sunday evening."

"Then you've no daily service?"

"Would it be worth while for my father to read matins to the echoes? There would be nobody else."

She was the most delightful, the most original, girl he had ever met, as much at her ease with him as if he had taken her in to dinner at some small cosy party. He forgot that he was a fugitive and a convict, all the more easily, perhaps, since he had cast the prison slough, that hideous raiment of which he had always been acutely conscious, as of some loathsome substance clinging to his flesh.

He followed her along the narrow path from the Vicarage gardens to the church porch, and she opened the ponderous, unwilling door and took him into the place of echoes, where the sound of their footsteps reverberated from every stone of the fine arched roof. She had left her lantern in the yard, lest a gleam of light should be seen from afar, and the interior of the church was so dark that she had to take his hand and lead him to the chosen spot.

It was a spacious family pew in a corner under the organ, a retreat in which a country squire and his belongings might sleep through a prosy sermon, unseen and unrebuked. There were plenty of cushions, and the pew was almost paved with great oval hassocks, and it was curtained like a box in an antique coffeehouse.

"There," said Vera triumphantly, when she had introduced the unknown to this old-world luxury. "You can be very comfortable here till six o'clock, when I shall come and unlock the church door, and you can steal out and get on to the road to Okehampton. It will be light soon after six, and I hope you'll be very careful, and get safely away from Okehampton station. Good-night."

"Good-night, and God bless you for the sweetest Christian soul upon this wicked earth!"

"Oh, please don't praise me! I like doing it."

He listened to her light footsteps on the matted floor, till the last echo of them faded into silence, and then he knelt down and breathed a thanksgiving which was mostly a prayer that she might be rewarded for her beneficence to an unknown wretch in bitter need of kindness.

Vera went across churchyard and garden with quick and springing steps. She was intensely pleased with herself. She had thought out every detail, sitting by the fire in the schoolroom, in the enforced idleness of that half-hour when her governess refused to ring for the lamp, lest Sarah should be cross at being rung for, preferring to take her own time about everything. She had sat on the hearthrug in the firelight, when her frock was short and her hair was long, thinking of what she would do for a runaway prisoner. She had Pip's story in her memory, that immortal story of Pip and the man from the hulks; but Pip was quite a child, and could hardly be expected to do much for his convict. She meant to make her convict a free man.

The clock struck two while she was going up to her room. Her candle was burnt down to the socket, and her fire had gone out. She stowed away the convict's kit at the bottom of her wardrobe. She had her plan for disposing of it piece by piece during

the gardener's dinner-hour, when there was an autumnal bonfire of weeds and rubbish in the kitchen-garden, or perhaps in the dusk after the men had gone home, and while the weeds were still smouldering.

She slept in short snatches, and her sleep was full of dreams—not of one convict, but of a whole realm of penal servitude—building convicts, agricultural convicts, convicts in quarries, and convicts on the sea. She was glad when her American alarum ran down at half-past five; glad to get up and cool her ardent fancies in ice-cold water, and clothe herself in her plainest skirt and blouse, and to steal softly downstairs and out of doors by garden and churchyard to set her convict free.

He was waiting by the church door when she opened it. She brought him an ash stick, and a shabby old drawing portfolio, and an old tin colour-box

“ You must take these,” she said, “ so that you may look as if you had been sketching on the moor. There’s a dreadful attempt of mine unfinished—in the portfolio. It will look natural.”

“ You are a genius in invention as you are an angel in kindness,” he said.

She gave him a little packet in white paper.

“ There’s only fifteen and sixpence,” she said. “ I hope it will pay your fare to London. To tell you the truth, it’s all the ready money I have.”

His voice was choked with tears, and he could not find words to thank her.

“ You think of everything,” he said.

“ Oh, I thought it all out, ages ago.”

“ That’s the only thing I can’t understand: your ages ago.”

“ Well, you see, from the time I was twelve years old and read a good deal about prisoners, I have always thought that I should love to help a good convict—even if he wasn’t quite innocent. If he

was ever so guilty, he might be repentant, you see; and I thought if he was clever enough and courageous enough to escape, he ought to be helped. And so I thought it out, and made my plan; and when the dog barked last night, I knew my convict had come."

"Your convict will never forget you—never cease to think of you with gratitude while he draws the breath of life. Tell me your name, that I may lock it in my heart."

"My name is Vera Penroyal. We are a very old Cornish family. My father is Emanuel Penroyal, vicar of this place. And now good-bye. I must get back to the house before the servants come downstairs."

"May I touch your hand?"

She gave it to him instantly, and he bent down and kissed it, almost as he might have kissed some sacred relic.

She ran off, and then turned suddenly, and ran back to him, as he stood in the porch watching her.

"I forgot to give you this," she said, handing him a small packet of chocolate. "I am sorry I couldn't bring you any food, but if I had taken any more they might have missed it."

"I will feed upon the memory of your goodness."

"Oh, but don't you really like chocolate?" she asked, disappointed.

"Immensely; but chocolate is a sensual indulgence. My mind, my fancy, my heart, will feed on the memory of the noblest girl in Christendom."

She ran off before he had finished his speech. She was beginning to be afraid of her convict.

## CHAPTER II.

LORRINGFORD PLACE had awakened from a slumber of years, and had awakened with a burst of vital power. In spite of indifferent owners and incompetent agents, the natural beauties of the spot had attracted a purchaser, in the person of Mrs. Warden, the widow of a South African millionaire, who did not even try to bargain with the owner, but gave the price demanded for a place which, she said, appealed to her better feelings.

If asked to define those better feelings, she would have expatiated on her love of beauty, the artistic element in her nature, which could find absolute happiness in lines and colours that delighted her eyes, in atmospheres and accidents of picturesqueness in a landscape that charmed her senses.

She was an elderly woman, and one of those delightful women who can make youth perceive beauty in age, instead of making mock of it. She asked no consideration for her sixty odd years, expected neither deference nor indulgence, but obtained both by sheer force of character, which raised her above the common herd. She was generous almost to a fault, bigoted, a keen partisan, and charmingly inconsistent on occasion; democratic to the verge of Socialism, and rejoicing in the assassination of any monarch, minister, or public official who had oppressed the people, yet a worshipper of meritorious kings and queens.

She had never been handsome, but at sixty she

was picturesque, and not wanting in dignity. Her large white satin bonnet, crowning silvery hair, reminded old people of Queen Marie Amélie; her gowns followed no mode of the hour, but were always handsome and presentable. The parochial sentence passed upon her when she made her first appearance at Lorringford Church was that she ought to have been a duchess.

Her husband, Matthew Warden, had been dead five years. Their only child, a daughter, had died within a few years of her marriage with a captain in a Highland regiment. She had left two children, a boy and a girl, the girl only a few months old at the time of her death. The widower had married again after a year or two, badly; and Mr. and Mrs. Warden had desired to adopt both children, and to relieve the father of all responsibility in the future. But Captain Hammond had refused to part with the boy, though he knew that in doing so he might be spoiling his son's chances of fortune. The refusal was dictated by his second wife, who declared that to have both the children taken away would be to besmirch her character as a respectable married woman. She had played other parts in her time, but she was particularly keen upon this novel assumption, and was on the alert to perceive covert insults and indirect attacks upon her reputation as an immaculate matron.

Captain Hammond delivered the two-year-old girl into her grandmother's hands without any severe sacrifice of paternal feeling. Mrs. Hammond, in her own distinctly modern phraseology, "had no use for her," a little, squalling, troublesome thing, whose white muslin frocks almost doubled the laundress's bill.

"A good riddance, Jeanette," she told her confidential Swiss maid. "The child never took to me nor me to her. Rannie's another pair of shoes, and if I don't have any of my own——"

"Le ciel vous en garde, madame. A bébé would spoil all madame's pleasure. Madame was made for le grand monde, not to sit in a nursery with a squalling bébé."

"Well, perhaps I'm better without," sighed Mrs. Hammond. "I like Rannie, and I mean to be a mother to him."

In evidence of which intention she had already taught the six-year-old boy to sip champagne out of her glass and to find fault with the dinner.

Randolph was an attractive boy, bold and precocious, with black eyes and strong features, like his father, full of vitality and afraid of nothing. Muriel was blonde and delicate, recalling the fragile beauty of her mother's childhood, and afraid of everything.

Fear fled away when she found herself the idol of indulgent grandparents, the child queen of a delightful household, where even the servants were ladies and gentlemen. The servants in Rockingham Gardens had been dreadful, almost as bad as the mistress.

Muriel was sixteen when the hazard of a summer holiday on the Upper Thames made grandmother and granddaughter acquainted with Lorrington Village and Lorrington House. They came from Henley in a steam launch, exploring the stream and its backwaters; and so discovered the neglected lawns and gardens, where a dilapidated board on the river bank informed them that this desirable freehold mansion and park, meadow land and woods, of three hundred and sixty acres, were for sale.

"Oh, Grannie, what a sweet old house! It looks as if it had been standing empty for a hundred years; and I'm sure it must swarm with ghosts. 'Apply for key and all information to Messrs. Lowgood.' Oh, Grannie, do let us explore."

Muriel was like Mrs. Elton in Jane Austen's "Emma": always bent upon exploring; but in no other respect did she resemble Mrs. Elton.

They landed near the old grey Norman church, and that was duly explored and admired, with the old churchyard, and the farmhouse that had once been the Grange attached to a mediæval monastery, of which a stone dovecote and other picturesque vestiges remained. They strolled about in the sunshine; they sat on a bench above the lock, where no boat was passing.

It was an ideal spot—a place of exceeding quiet, steeped in the restfulness of a summer afternoon.

"How I should love to live here always," sighed Muriel, in a drowsy ecstasy.

"You mean you would like it to be always such weather as this, that you might idle in the sunshine."

"Oh, Grannie, am I idle? Does Miss Baxter complain of me?"

"Complain! No! You are too artful a puss to be complained of. You take care to please everybody, so that you may be always able to please yourself."

"What a character! Oh, Grannie, don't say that I am artful; I hate artfulness above every other vice."

"Then I'll only call you diplomatic."

"That sounds nicer, though I believe it means the same thing. No, Grannie, I am not artful; but I try to please people, because happiness consists in everybody being pleased. I can't stand reproofing looks. I hate to vex anybody. Life is so nice, and people are so lovable, when everything goes smoothly. I shudder when I think of Randolph's fate; to live with his father and that horrible woman—to hear all their quarrels—and their worse makings-up, when they have champagne, and shake hands across the dinner-table—and he calls her his old girl, and she calls him Toby."

Muriel uttered the name with concentrated disgust, as if it were the worst feature of the case.

“ Randolph ought not to tell you such things.”

“ He doesn’t mind as much as I should. He says it is a phase of life—and life is always amusing. He means to write a book about his people some day. He says it would be equal to *Fielding*. I don’t know *Fielding*.”

“ I hope not, indeed.”

“ And I don’t want to know him, if he is always a brown calf book in twenty volumes, as he is in *Gran’pa’s library*.”

Grandfather’s library was a room that had been in a manner sacred while Grandfather lived, and had been locked up since his death, for the old mahogany bookcases were rich in classics of a character unfitted for the inquiring eyes of a school-girl. Grandfather had bought himself land and gardens, and a handsome house with furniture and all things complete, in a rural district of Hertfordshire, where Mrs. Warden and her granddaughter had lived contentedly since his death, though the widow had never been quite happy in surroundings where every object her eyes rested on recalled the kind companion of forty years, her comrade in joy and sorrow, in poverty and wealth.

Forty years ago they had been exiles, farming in Cape Colony, and thus Matthew Warden had been on the spot when the first Cape diamonds were discovered in a humble homestead; and by his alertness and business capacity he had been one of the first to turn his ploughshare into a miner’s pick. He made a little over a million in that first scramble for wealth, a poor and trivial achievement compared with the colossal fortunes of some who followed him; but he thought himself supremely happy when he could tell his brave and industrious wife that the days of African exile were done, and that he was going to sell the wooden house where

she had been cook and breadmaker, cheerful companion, and able administrator. It had been a hard life for an Englishwoman reared in all that English life has of comfort, but she had borne it with unfailing cheerfulness.

Her Kafir servants had been troublesome, slow to learn, quick to forget, but they loved her, and wept at parting.

All this had happened while Muriel's mother was far away, a child, a girl, and then a woman, well cared for by an aunt in a comfortable Devonshire vicarage. Her mother and father came back to England in time to assist at her courtship and marriage, and she was married from the house in Hertfordshire which Mr. Warden had bought, the patriarchal home of a vanished race.

Muriel insisted upon seeing Lorringford Place next day ; and her grandmother, while seeming only to indulge a girl's caprice, was really as much interested as the girl.

They left no corner unvisited, from the garrets to the cellars. The house was in a gruesome condition. Damp had blistered the walls, rats had gnawed the skirting boards, every evil that could befall an unoccupied house had befallen Lorringford Place. Mrs. Warden and Muriel contemplated the fine old rooms with compassionate looks, almost as they would have pitied some human wreck, perishing by the world's neglect. Even in this forlorn state they could see that the house was beautiful. The nobly planned rooms, where every detail of doors and ceilings, panelling and cornices, window frames and mantelpieces, was the perfection of early Georgian architecture, could not be utterly disfigured even by dirt and damp.

“ It is just the house I have dreamt of,” said Mrs. Warden.

“ And there must be a ghost,” said Muriel.

The agent protested that nothing supernatural had ever interfered with the comfort of the inmates of Lorringford Place, whereupon Muriel stamped her little white boating shoe upon the echoing boards.

“But I want the house to be haunted,” she cried, with pretty petulance, and the agent felt half inclined to invent some spectral appearance, and wavered between a headless hound and an old woman in a black satin sacque.

He addressed himself, however, to the elder lady.

“Ghosts are all very well in Christmas stories,” he said, “but they make difficulties with servants.”

“Of course they do. My granddaughter is talking nonsense. But can you tell me why this sweet old house has been so shamefully treated—or not treated? Is it in Chancery?”

“Not a bit of it, madam. It belongs to rich people, who don’t care a straw for the place. They have a mansion and a large estate in another county, and they live mostly in London and at Monte Carlo. When I put it before the gentleman that the house was going to ruin, and that something ought to be done to uphold it, he said my business was to sell the place, and not to bother him about it.”

“How long has it been empty?”

“Well, I should say the best part of ten years. I could have sold it half a dozen times, if the owner would have come to terms with a purchaser, but he wouldn’t hear of an offer. He refused to spend a pound upon the premises, or to bate a pound of the price. The grass-land has been let all the time to an annual tenant, at a ridiculous rent.”

Muriel walked about the stately old rooms, as if she had been magnetized. The August sunshine glorified the damp-stained walls, and, even in decay, the gardens were beautiful, and the river below those neglected lawns was a revelation to the girl from Hertfordshire.

"Oh," she sighed heart-brokenly, "I wish I had never seen this place."

"Gracious powers, child ! Why ?"

"Because, I'm afraid, I shall hate Framber, after this."

Framber was the name of the Hertfordshire park and manor house, between Hitchin and Hatfield.

"Oh, but Framber is lovely—with finer timber than anything I can see here."

Muriel lifted her right arm with a sweeping gesture, intensely dramatic, and pointed to the Thames.

"Look at that!" she exclaimed. "Framber is odious—Framber is disgustingly dry. Not a glimpse of water in any direction."

"The young lady is right," said the agent, with his eye upon the grandmother. "Lorringford is altogether an exceptional property—one of the loveliest bits on the Upper Thames."

Mrs. Warden committed herself to nothing ; but the seed had been sown. When Muriel wanted anything she had a way of getting it, whether it was a horse, or a dog, or a window broken out in her boudoir, or a sable tippet, or a larger croquet lawn. When Muriel wanted things they had to be found or done. Mrs. Warden discovered shortly that Lorringford appealed to her better feelings ; and that she had never cared for Framber since she lost her husband.

"Framber without gran'pa is like *Hamlet* without the Prince," she said to Muriel, between laughter and tears.

Framber was in the market a week later, and Lorringford was bought. Mrs. Warden took a furnished flat in London for the autumn, whence she could run down by rail and supervise the restoration of the house and grounds. Nothing was to be altered. Everything was to be restored, even old Lady Gowering's elaborate dairy, and the queer

old subterranean passage between dairy and kitchen. Mrs. Warden's herd of choice Jersey cows had been her hobby ever since she settled in England, and she was as fond of her dairy as Clarissa Harlowe. She had never forgotten the old farming days in South Africa.

Muriel had to wait nearly a year before the house was ready for occupation. It was July when the final details were finished, and the handsome Georgian furniture, the Jersey herd, and the horses and dogs had been transferred from Framer to Lorringford.

"I'm sure the dear old things must be delighted with their new quarters," Muriel said, "and if those Chippendale bookcases could only see how much handsomer they look in this delicious room they'd jump for joy."

Framer and Lorringford were both houses of the early years of the Brunswick succession, and the furniture that had been chosen when Framer was new was by no means out of keeping at Lorringford Place. The new chintzes gave the sunlit living room the gaiety and charm of a floral arbour, the carpets were subdued in colouring, but of those pale and exquisite hues which the smatterer at once recognizes as Louis Seize, there being a convention among smatterers that everything delicate and simple is Louis Seize, while everything florid and meretricious is Louis Quinze.

There was nothing conventional in any of the rooms. Mrs. Warden abhorred the stereotyped in all things. There was no silver table in the drawing-room; but Matthew Warden's fine collection of Old English plate adorned a buffet in the dining-room. There was old china enough to stock a Bond Street bric-à-brac shop; for Mrs. Warden had been buying Dresden and Chelsea ever since she settled herself in her English home with her own cheque-book and a substantial balance at her bankers.

The Wardens had not tried to take the town by storm with their new wealth. There had been no expensive London house, no costly entertaining of rank and royalty. They had just lived their simple unpretentious lives in their rural home, visiting, and visited by, their county neighbours, always hospitable, without fuss and without display. The wines, the food, the servants, the stables, the gardens and hot-houses at Framber attained a quiet perfection which was esteemed by everybody who knew the house and its owners; and for these things, as well as for widespread charity, Matthew Warden's income more than sufficed. It left a margin for a liberal indulgence of the collector's passion.

Thus it was that when their Berkshire neighbours came to call upon Mrs. Warden and her granddaughter they found a house that looked as if it had been furnished nearly two hundred years ago, and treasures of old china and old silver that filled connoisseurs with surprise and envy. Everything was good. That was the wonder of it. There was no rubbish.

The neighbourhood had lost no time in exhibiting tokens of friendliness.

Kimberley is a name to conjure with, and the Aladdin splendours of certain South African diamond merchants have given an exaggerated idea of all fortunes made in those wonderful regions. Mrs. Warden was at once credited with five millions as the minimum Kimberley fortune. Twelve millions had for some years been accepted as the maximum, but since the South African invasion of Park Lane the figure had been steadily rising.

Muriel went dancing through the house like a modern Titania, a creature compacted of sunshine and starlight, the ethereal essence of all that is lovely in day and night. She was only seventeen,

and in her joyous moods seemed the very essence of youth, not a girl, but a spirit, a thing of perpetual movement, a life too vivid to be still. She took to the Thames as if she had been the daughter of a river god. She must have a skiff, and a punt, and a canoe, and she must learn to handle sculls and paddle and pole. A highly accomplished river character was engaged to teach her those arts, and one Thomas Peacock, a skilled waterman, was attached to the establishment to ferry the family across the back-water to the landing-stage near Lorringford Church.

In that delicious summer, the kind of summer that is called old-fashioned, Muriel almost lived on the river. She was always devising little expeditions to lure her grandmother into a boat, and carry her to some willow-shaded bank for a picnic luncheon or picnic tea. She had been taught to swim at a fashionable London club, and had won prizes and defeated girls of twice her weight and strength; so Mrs. Warden had less anxiety about those watery wanderings than she must have suffered otherwise.

There were garden-parties and croquet tournaments enough within motor distance to have occupied every afternoon of that brilliant August; but Muriel voted these rural or semi-rural gatherings slow and boring, and she had not yet taken seriously to croquet.

“I can’t creep about all day with a heavy mallet in my hand under a burning sun,” she protested. “I can’t think croquet, and talk croquet, and dream croquet; and till I can I’m no use in tournaments.”

Miss Baxter, the devoted governess friend of Muriel’s early years, from six to sixteen, had left Framer to the tune of wedding bells one April afternoon, as the bride of a curate to whom she had been engaged eight or nine years, during which probationary period a considerable portion of the young lady’s salary had gone towards the young

man's college expenses. They were utterly happy 'n the realization of their innocent dreams, and thought themselves passing rich on a hundred and fifty pounds a year.

Miss Jane Baxter being gone, and Muriel approaching her seventeenth birthday, it did not occur to Mrs. Warden to look for another governess or companion. Was she not herself companion enough for the girl she idolized, till the inevitable lover should come to despoil her of her darling? Muriel had grown up with her dearest Jenny and was fond of her; but a strange young woman as governess-companion would have been acutely boring. She was never bored by her grandmother's society, but she wanted a great deal of liberty; to roam at her own sweet will in the gardens and woods, and to explore every creek and backwater within navigable distance from Lorringford. She had a maid whom she could take with her if she was going to be out longer than usual, just to satisfy her grandmother; a little French maid born and bred in the Faubourg du Temple, who could boil a gipsy kettle and make tea for her, and who afforded sport by her abject fear of horned cattle.

“‘ These violent delights have violent ends,’ ” quoted Mrs. Warden, when the girl rhapsodized about the riv'r. “‘ In six months' time you will be tired of Lorringford, and after uprooting me from Framber you will tease me to buy another place.”

“‘ Oh, Grannie, am I inconstant, or am I a fool? You say I always get what I want. I think that must be just because I know what I want. As long as I live I shall adore Lorringford. And as for uprooting—you know you were tired of poor old Framber.’ ”

“‘ Not tired of the place, Muriel; but there was always the empty chair.’ ”

“‘ Poor, dear, kind Gran'pa! ’ ”

“‘ There is the empty chair here too,’ ” sighed Mrs. Warden; “‘ the empty place in my life.’ ”

Muriel hung over her, and kissed and consoled her. Mrs. Warden was one of those widows who are widows indeed; and she had never ceased to regret the snapped link in her smooth and prosperous life. She would lie awake sometimes thinking of the old rough-and-tumble existence on the veldt, and remembering how happy she and her help-mate had been before they began to be rich.

"I'll tell you what it is, Gran'ma," Muriel said with conviction, "there is something wanted in this house."

"I fancied you had thought of everything. I know you were exacting and expensive enough."

"Oh, this is not a piece of furniture. It is nothing you can buy. What we want is a man."

Mrs. Warden almost started out of her chair.

"What can you mean, child?"

"Two incapable women like us require the masculine element to keep them straight. We want a man—better than a servant—and not so boring as a relation. We are both most unbusiness-like beings, and can't reckon a tradesman's bill between us, at least we always make the total different—whether we start from the top or the bottom. Your pass-book is a terror to you—for you never seem quite sure whether the pencil figures on the right hand mean a handsome balance or an alarming overdraft. You don't know whether you get your proper dividends from all those Consols and railway shares and things Gran'pa left you. The very State may be robbing you like a professional pickpocket, for anything you know."

Mrs. Warden assembled her needles, and scrutinized the stocking she was knitting, as if seeking counsel.

"My dear, I get on very well."

"Because you don't mind being cheated; and I'm sure you must be cheated horribly. Look at the stable for instance. You often moan over the bills; but have you any idea how much a horse ought to

eat, or what chamois leathers and sponges ought to cost? From the saddlers' bill one would think the horses eat more sponges and leathers than oats. And what do we know of a kitchen garden, except that the vegetables one wants are never there? The sums you pay for onion seed would be a godsend to a poor family, though neither you nor I ever look at an onion."

"Your grandfather used sometimes to complain of the vegetable seeds," Mrs. Warden murmured feebly.

"Yes, but Gran'pa *knew*! When he complained he always put down his foot, and things were altered."

"I could never believe that Bailey or Cobb is dishonest," said Mrs. Warden, naming the heads of stable and garden department.

"Not dishonest; only they cheat. It is our fault. They can't help cheating when they find that nobody ever adds up an account or asks a question. And it's the same in the house. I shouldn't be surprised if you were giving half-a-crown a pound for forequarters of lamb. Come, you don't know that you are not, do you?"

Mrs. Warden drew herself up with her most dignified air.

"I have no reason to suppose that I give more than the proper price for anything, Muriel."

"Ah, but you don't know the proper price, do you?"

"I am not going to be lectured by a baby."

"What you want is a secretary—a kind of clerk—a nice useful honest creature who would look after everything, add up the bills, compare prices, and frighten the servants and the tradespeople. There must be one frightening person in a house if things are to go on properly. We want a homely, middle-aged man, a sort of a Dominie Sampson, don't you know."

Mrs. Warden deeply resented the suggestion, yet was vaguely conscious that such a person would be

useful. Those bills were certainly somewhat scaring. The totals fluctuated in a curious way, and seemed to obey no law of averages. Sometimes after a houseful of company they were moderate—sometimes they increased by leaps and bounds when there were no visitors.

“It is not easy to find such Dominies,” she said, carelessly. “And I should hate him if he had to live with us.”

“Like the real Dominie? We would not have him for worlds. He could live at one of the lodges. They are good enough for any gentleman. Or if that wouldn’t do, you could take the rooms at the Lock House, than which I can imagine nothing more ideal. He would come every morning for an hour or two, and take your instructions, and write your letters, and cheques, and explain your pass-book, and keep all your accounts.”

“But how do you know that *he* would not cheat me?”

“If he did it would be only one instead of many—and not half so worrying. Besides, you would take care to get a thoroughly honest man—of unblemished character. You would know all about him before he crossed our threshold. And he would be perfectly happy in his simple, elderly way at the Lock House. And he would have so good a salary that he wouldn’t be tempted to cheat you.”

Mrs. Warden gave a troubled sigh, and began to count the heel stitches with a frowning brow. She liked life to go smoothly. She would *almost* rather shut her eyes and let herself be robbed than look into things and make painful discoveries. She was vexed with Muriel for her glib talk and precocious common-sense. A child like that to talk about tradesmen’s bills! Yet she felt that common-sense was there.

“I’ll think about it, Muriel,” she said, after a long pause, “and if I should hear of such a person——”

## CHAPTER III.

VERA PENROYAL had lived all her young life upon the moor. Her eyes had first opened upon a lonely Vicarage in a moorland village nine miles from Okehampton.

To her there was no lovelier land than those wild hills and valleys where she had walked and ridden for sixteen years, ever since she was able to toddle at her father's side, or to sit upon the sturdy little forest pony which had been his birthday gift, on her attaining the responsible age of four years, at which period he considered her big enough and wise enough to sit upon a side-saddle and handle a bridle. She showed herself quick at learning to manage her mount, as most children are who begin to ride before they know the meaning of fear, or the risk of sitting upon an unreasoning animal that will leap into mid air at sight of a wind-driven newspaper, or bolt at the rustle of a falling leaf.

She could just remember her mother as a beautiful languid person, whose laces and handkerchiefs smelt of violets, and who used to go to the piano sometimes in the evening firelight and sing to her own accompaniment, so sweetly, that the memory of those old-fashioned songs, English and French, could bring tears to the daughter's eyes twelve years after the last note had sounded. She used to sit on the carpet, nestled in her mother's silken skirt, listening to the low, sweet voice, with that

precocious melancholy children feel without knowing why.

Mrs. Penroyal had died of what our neighbours call a *maladie de langueur*; but some of her friends, those who had known her in her girlhood, and who had visited her at the Vicarage, said she had died of the moor.

To Emanuel Penroyal's mind there could be no healthier dwelling-place than the substantially built stone house on the edge of the moor. The living was a very small thing, but he had between six and seven hundred a year of his own, and had been able to give his young wife every comfort that their rural solitude allowed. Good servants, warm fires, a pony carriage, and a well-kept garden, sheltered by high walls from the forest winds. All these things she had. But the relentless monotony of the life crushed her. The Vicar was country bred, and to him the moorland air was nectar, the moorland landscape was everlastingly beautiful. For him there was no monotony in outside things, since every season of the year showed him a changing earth and a changing sky. He knew every flower and every moss upon the moor, every star in the great vault above, with its hours and seasons.

For him that lonely world was full of variety and interest. He was a naturalist, a botanist, and a palaeontologist. The digging up of a flint knife upon the moor, the discovery of a new variety in bog moss, a new departure in water-beetles, would keep him interested for weeks. He read his *Times* religiously every evening, but wars and rumours of wars, political strifes and changes of ministry, were of a lower interest than the things close at hand. He knew every man, woman and child in his thinly-populated and widely-scattered parish, and he did his duty by every one of them. He was fifty-three years of age when he married a romantic girl, who

thought it would be rapture to change the commonplace gaieties of South Kensington for solitude amidst picturesque surroundings with a husband who adored her.

She never gave expression to disappointment or discontent : she went on loving the husband who spent the greater part of his life in his study, and for whom his books and specimens were an inexhaustible source of occupation and pleasure. He never left off adoring her, and he was broken-hearted when it was borne in upon him that she was not so blooming or so animated in that divine atmosphere as she had been in the relaxing air—or no air—of South Kensington. She could give no definite answer to his anxious questions. She could only assure him that she was not really ill, only a little run down. That was all the Okehampton doctor could tell him. She was run down. It was the newest form of malady ; and it had no specific symptoms and no Greek name.

She would not tell her husband that she had the nostalgia of paving stones and street lamps, the longing for the sound of many footsteps and various voices, for lighted shop windows in the autumn gloaming, for carriage wheels, and even for street organs, for the stir and movement of life. Her rural neighbours within seven or eight miles came to see her at long intervals, and rather bored her. Ruddy-faced, sunburnt girls, braced by hockey, dropped in upon her in muddy boots and spoilt the carpet in her morning-room, the room her husband had made beautiful for her. They would sit and laugh and talk, and tell her the last news of the hockey club, and chide her for not joining it, while she was thinking of the Artillery Band at the Albert Hall on Sunday afternoons, the concerts, the theatres, the parties, the dances, and all the bustling eager life of West-End London, a life that seemed to belong to past ages.

The Vicar took her to Torquay for a fortnight in the winter season, and the sight of the people and the dainty shops, and an entertainment or two, revived her ; but her spirits sank again when she found herself in the familiar rooms with the silence round her. She grew gradually indifferent about all things, could not remember the days of the week, and would ask her servants plaintively if it would soon be Sunday. Her interest in flint knives and club mosses had never been real ; but she had pretended with success in the first year or two. Now she looked at the most precious discovery with wistful, melancholy eyes ; and nothing the Vicar could tell her of the habits and dwellings of prehistoric man could arouse her interest, or make her glad.

And so from that growing indifference she sank to an apathy of mind and body, not run down, but run out, and there came one sad autumn evening, when a Vicarage servant saw the waters of the Dart blue in the dim light, sure sign of a coming death, and when the cry of the mountain stream sounded its sad warning from afar. The end came suddenly at last—and the doctor called it heart-failure. The fading life ceased like the flame of a candle that had been a long time flickering in the deep socket of an old-fashioned candlestick, and that went out in an instant.

This was how Vera's mother died when the child was only four years old, and those who knew her best knew that she had died of the moor.

“ The master oughtn't to have married a foreigner.”

That was the Vicar's body-servant and butler's verdict, when the pretty young mistress was carried to the moorland graveyard.

Emanuel Penroyal mourned for his fair young wife with a deep regret ; but had no consciousness of wrong done to her. Indeed, he would have made

any sacrifice to secure her happiness ; and it was not want of love, but want of understanding that had darkened his eyes to the needs of a town-bred girl. To this placid and deeply-absorbed student a mind that could not be interested in prehistoric man was unthinkable.

He took his two children to his heart, and cared for them with an almost maternal tenderness. The boy was seven years old, a strong block of a boy, who loved the moor and throve upon it, and gave very little trouble. A German nursery governess had succeeded the rosy-cheeked country nursemaid, and to her care Vera was relegated at the age of five, and the word "nursery" was heard no more. The nursery had become the schoolroom ; but for their higher learning the two children went to their father's den, and sat on the hearthrug while he talked to them. He lectured them in his grave and gentle way as earnestly as if he had been dis- coursing to a class of undergraduates. Here he found no failure in the power of prehistoric man to interest and amuse. These young minds accepted the Drift and the Flint ages as periods of inexhaustible wonder and delight. Anthropology and Palæontology filled the place of fairy tales ; and the drawers in which the flint tools were kept were to them treasure-houses, and they would go back to the mild and unimaginative Fräulein bursting with information, and eager to give pleasure.

For relaxation they had their ponies, their dogs, a zoological family of lizards, frogs, toads and newts, a small aviary, and best of all they had the moor, of which they never wearied. Then, by and by, Leonard was suddenly discovered to be too strenuous a being for feminine control, and was sent to Tiverton, there to walk away from all competitors in learning, as in manly sports—a tall and sturdy moorland lad, strong as a young eagle. From Blundell's he went to Oxford, where his sister

fondly expected him to "sweep the board," and where he was doing well at the time of Vera's adventure with her convict. He spent all his vacations on the moor, untempted by the attractions of strange places at home or abroad. If he had sighed for change he would have chosen a farmhouse lodging upon Exmoor, where he had had many a gallop after the staghounds while he was a schoolboy and spending most of his pocket-money on hireling ponies.

For the girl the moor was her life, and the boy came back to it summer after summer and winter after winter with unabating gladness. That deep solitude so near the haunts of men was a surprise and a delight to the lad after all the noise and movement of a big public school. His eye had never grown dull to the beauty of the scene in the long, long days, when the foxgloves were like regiments of fairy soldiers, and the white fluttering cotton reed was like summer snow. There was infinite peace, infinite joy, in that wild scene of rock and morass, mountain stream and granite boulder, so remote from the common world of every-day life, where men were striving and bustling and hurrying about, where the whole purport of existence seemed to be to get from one place to another, and where neither steam nor petroleum could carry them fast enough. Vera had been born and bred sixteen hundred feet over the heads of common people, and perched on the summit of High Willhays she could look down upon the life of towns as something paltry and despicable, something she had no desire to know nearer than in a bird's-eye view.

For nearly forty years Emanuel Penroyal's name had appeared in the last line of a paragraph in the baronetcy.

"Heir-presumptive, his cousin, the Rev.

Emanuel Penroyal." For forty years Mr. Penroyal had enjoyed this faint reflected glory, as possible successor to his first cousin, Sir Godfrey Penroyal, of Fox Copse, Windsor, and he seemed to himself no nearer that modest elevation now than he had been eight-and-thirty years ago when Sir Godfrey was a young man about town, a bachelor and a buck, and a lieutenant in a Lancer regiment.

In those days everybody supposed that Sir Godfrey would marry, and take his proper place in the world as the husband of a well-born wife, and the proud father of young men and maidens, and the presumption of Emanuel's inheritance was the most shadowy thing ; but at five-and-thirty Sir Godfrey left the Army—in piping times of peace—and took to roaming about the world, shooting big game in three continents, and taking his chance of the North Pole, and finally settled down into a confirmed bachelor. After this, it seemed a mere question of staying power in the heir-presumptive.

Then, after a common fashion of confirmed bachelors, Sir Godfrey at sixty-seven years of age fell in love with a comrade's granddaughter aged eighteen, and having, in the manner of Othello, charmed her with stories of the beasts he had shot, and the "narrow squeaks" he had had for his life from lions and niggers in savage wildernesses, made her Lady Penroyal, whereupon his parson-cousin prepared himself for the advent of an heir, and the disappearance of his presumptive title from the new Debrett. There was an old one in the library which Vera had pored over as a child, pleased to see her father's name printed in a book, among dukes and earls, and sometimes asking :

"Papa, what is a baronet?"

Sir Godfrey lived very happily with his girl-wife, but his cousin's name as heir-presumptive was

never taken out of the baronetage, and early in the year after the convict's appearance in the Vicarage yard the *Times* obituary informed the moorland parson of his kinsman's death, and his own succession as ninth baronet—a succession that carried with it a small estate in Berkshire, and certain lands in North Cornwall. The rest of his property—being all that he was free to dispose of—Sir Godfrey left to his wife, unconditionally. She had borne with an old man's humours for eleven years, he wrote in the will made a year before his death, and it was only fair that she should be left free to marry a young man.

Vera and her father sat at the table in the library studying the photographs of Fox Copse which the late Sir Godfrey's solicitor had sent them, the house, the lodge gates, the shrubberies, the croquet lawn. Everything was good of its kind, choice conifers, a large flower garden, plenty of glass, fine stables, but everything was essentially tame and prim, almost suburban.

"I'm afraid we shall never like it," Vera sighed, thinking of the tors, the bogs, the cleft hills through which the rushing streamlets ran with a sound that she had loved.

"The cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep."

That line had often kept time to her pony's feet as she walked him up a hill.

"It is a more suitable home for a girl of your age," said her father, "and I think you ought to be happy there."

"I could be happy anywhere with you, dad. But we shall both miss the moor, horribly, horribly. Where am I to ride, for instance?"

"There is Windsor Park, or the Forest."

"A forest? Like ours?"

"Not quite so wild. It is more like a park, with fine old timber. But you will enjoy the change."

“I’m afraid not. I was born on the moor.”

“If it had only suited your dear mother as well as it suits you!” sighed the Vicar. “But I’m afraid the moorland air was too strong for her. I ought to have found that out sooner,” he added, in one of his moments of remorse.

The Vicar went to Berkshire to attend Sir Godfrey’s funeral, and came back to the Vicarage with a favourable account of Fox Copse. The house was spacious and comfortable, the gardens were lovely. There was a rose garden walled round with yew hedges that ought to delight Vera; and there was a lively neighbourhood such as her young imagination could not picture. Balls, parties, croquet tournaments, cavalry soldiers, a theatre.

“I would give them all for the moor,” said Vera.

But the change had to be. Sir Emanuel gave up his living, and, as soon as his successor had been appointed, migrated with his daughter, his old servants, Vera’s ponies and fox-terrier, to his new home on the edge of Windsor Forest.

## CHAPTER IV.

As there are London districts, Mayfair, Belgravia, Tyburnia, Sloania, which suggest nothing but pleasure ; so there are districts that suggest nothing but work, labyrinths of streets, and endless roads, gloomy squares, and gloomier courts, where nothing in the aspect or the manner of the people one meets, nothing in the shop windows or in the passing traffic, can convey the idea of life lived for its own sake. Everywhere in these gloomy neighbourhoods the stranger sees the things that indicate the life that is not worth living ; the daily struggle for existence ; the strenuous days of toil, and the brief nights of weariness, haunted by the dread of the newborn day that must come before the tired brain and the tired limbs have recovered from the burden of yesterday.

It was in one of the bettermost streets between Holborn and the Euston Road that Vera's convict had found a lodging, in a house of undoubted respectability, a house that was the sole fortune and maintenance of an elderly spinster, whose life was one long warfare against the grime and dust and smoke of the great city. Never wearying, never desisting in her efforts, like the lights of Heaven, without rest and without haste, Miss Dodd had contrived almost to achieve the impossible, and to keep her house both clean and airy, so that the name of Dodd, as engraved upon a neat brass plate on the right-hand door-post, was known to all the

shopkeepers within half a mile as a guarantee for cleanliness and comfort.

Vera's convict had heard of Miss Dodd from the friend with whom he found a ready shelter when a cab brought him from Waterloo Station, an unexpected guest, to a studio in Fitzroy Square, where his old school-fellow Mark Lister had been proving the metal he was made of, by nearly ten years of indomitable and unsuccessful work.

*Magnum opus* after *magnum opus*, subject historical, figures heroic size, had issued from the tall doorway in Fitzroy Square when the leaves were unfolding their vernal green; and had come back again like a sheeted ghost, to take its place with its face to the wall, among other grandiose compositions, such as poor Haydon loved to paint, and which seem to point the way to melancholy-madness and suicide. But Mark Lister had the happy-go-lucky temperament which is as good as Fortunatus's purse, and he loved art for art's sake, and work for work's sake. And being utterly happy while he painted, and having just cash enough to pay for house rent and mutton chops, he was able to bear the disappointments that crush weaker souls.

George Desmond and he had been at Eton together, and Mark's welcome was of the warmest. His astonishment was only less than his pleasure, and it was some moments before he could find speech. He could only wring his friend's hands, and stare at him in a kind of ecstasy.

"By Jupiter, I'm glad!" he said, and then again, "By Jupiter!"

And then, after a pause:

"How did you get away?"

"Then you know where I come from?"

"Of course I do, though you haven't taken off your hat."

George threw off the Vicar's slouched felt, and

showed the close-cropped hair that accentuated the outline of a well-shaped head, the forehead broad and full, the ears small, nothing coarse or sensual in the organization.

“ You shall sit to me for a Roman gladiator. Byron’s Gladiator, a single figure like the statue ! By Jupiter ! We’ll crack a bottle of the best ! It was a life sentence, wasn’t it ? ”

“ Penal servitude for life, which means twenty years with exemplary conduct. And, as I live, Mark, I knew no more about the thing than you do, till my father was arrested at Havre, on board the steamer that was to take him to America, and yet I had been one of the chief factors in the conspiracy.”

“ It was devilish of them to use you like that. For life ! And you were not three-and-twenty ! How long is it since the trial ? ”

“ I have been at Prince Town five years. I don’t know that I should ever have had the grit to get away if my father had gone on living. He had a stroke after he had been there a little over three years, and he was in the infirmary for the rest of the time—a year and a half. They let me be with him a good deal. The Governor was very kind to me—he let me have books ; so that I could study, and not eat my heart out.”

“ But how did you give them the slip ? ”

“ Oh, that’s a long story—I’ll tell you to-night over our pipes—if you mean to harbour me.”

“ If I mean ? Why, of course I’ll keep you as long as ever you like to stay. You know what chums we were at Eton. I’ve got plenty of room for you. The house is like a barrack ; and I’ve only my handy man and his wife.”

“ If you’ll keep me till my hair grows the conventional length ; till I’ve grown a moustache and a bit of a beard, I shall be as safe as houses.”

“ Stay for a year, stay always. I tell you I shall be glad of your company.”

"But how did you know that I was in that business? The real name never came out. We were sentenced under an alias."

"Oh, I knew your father by the description—and by one or two details of time and place; and then there was his photograph in one of the papers—very bad, but I was able to recognize it. The painter's eye, you know! But how in the name of wonder did you get clear off? I've seen many an account of an escape from the prison; but the poor devil has generally been caught before he got clear of the moor."

"Very few poor devils have such an angelic friend as I had."

"Oh, you had a friend who helped you?"

"That's the best part of the story. You shall have it all when we're tiled in. But are your servants to be trusted, Mark? They'll read about my escape in to-morrow's paper, and they may put two and two together. Won't they give me away?"

"I could trust Job, my handy man, with a legion of escaped prisoners. Job is staunch. I've had the couple with me since I took this house. They were the caretakers, and kept it empty half a dozen years or so—and did their level best to set me against it—drains all wrong—rats—etc., etc. So I said, 'Look here, my friends, I see what it is. You don't want to turn out, and I'm quite agreeable you should stay, if you'—pointing to Job—'can brush clothes and clean boots, and if your missus can grill a chop and boil a potato.' I could see in her eye that she was a genius for plain cooking, and Job had been a soldier-servant. They suit me down to the ground. Give you away! Not they. They give nothing away but the cold mutton, and I'm deuced glad to get rid of that."

With so kind a friend George Desmond could live in safety till he had grown the moustache and small square beard which made a considerable change in

his appearance. He had lived inside the capacious old house for the greater part of his time, refraining even from going out at night, lest there should be someone on the watch. He never felt quite sure of Job's or Mrs. Job's fidelity. His escape had been written about in all the newspapers, and had attracted a good deal of attention, for the bank frauds in which he had acted as an innocent accomplice were of so extensive a character as to be remembered when smaller felonies of the same date had been long forgotten.

The only airings he took during those winter weeks were enjoyed upon the roof of his friend's house, where, wrapped in an ancient fur coat that was one of the painter's favourite properties, he used to sit under the lee of a massive chimney stack, and read the morning papers.

He was not idle during those long slow days of a friendly captivity. His studies at Prince Town had been concentrated upon modern languages, and the five weary years had made him a master of Italian, Spanish, and German, and had extended his knowledge of French grammar and composition. He got his friend to order the new books that were making a stir among Continental readers: and he wrote reviews of them which at least were good enough to satisfy more than one editor. He liked the work, and took infinite pains with it. A literary career had been the dream of his youth, at Eton and Oxford; and in the hopeless position of a life prisoner, with the prospect of at least twenty years' seclusion from the outside world, his only possible relief had been found in the few books that the governor's compassion for an educated prisoner had allowed him. Those books had not been many, but they had been classics, and with those and his linguistic studies he had been able to occupy every hour not claimed by the State. And now, if he could escape recapture, and earn enough for the

simplest form of existence, he would count himself happy.

His friend Lister would have liked him to occupy the airy room on the top floor for an indefinite period, but George Desmond was determined to support himself by his own labour, or, failing that, to go under, as other men had gone.

Finding George fixed in his intention, Mark spent a morning in quest of the lodging that seemed to him most suitable to his friend's situation, a lodging where amidst the most common-place surroundings he might be as indistinguishable from the herd of humanity as one drop is from another in the wilderness of waters. In that obscure street innumerable footsteps of shabby-genteel young men went to and fro every day and every hour, the monstrous army of clerks passing and repassing with the cruel monotony of life. No one would be likely to notice one more breadwinner, even if he were better looking than the majority. There would always be a small minority of men who walked better, spoke better, wore their clothes better, than the ruck, men on whom the servant-girl at the area gate, and the dressmaker's apprentice hurrying to her work, looked with a kinder glance, and admired as "quite the gentleman."

Dodd's seemed to meet every requirement. The street lay between Brunswick Square and Euston Road, and was within ten minutes' walk of the Museum. The comfortable sitting-room and adjoining bedroom were on the second floor, and therefore more retired from the observation of chance visitors to the house than a lower floor would have been. The street was dull and ugly enough to get on the nerves of an idler; but Desmond was essentially a worker; and most of his hours would be spent in the reading room at the Museum, which seemed to Mark the very safest place for him. Who would ever think of looking

for a runaway convict among the slaves of pen and ink, the meek and inoffensive diggers in the mines of knowledge, the burrowers in the dust-heaps of forgotten history

The fugitive would be sought for naturally among men of action, rather than amidst these toilers and dreamers in the world of books. Desmond spent all his days in that atmosphere of Russia leather ; but he took care to avoid observation even in that quiet world, contenting himself with the books in the reference library, and thus did not become a familiar figure to the librarians and their staff. That vast range of volumes to which he could help himself without assistance or supervision was ample for his present needs. He was an omnivorous reader, and having no hope of any good thing ever coming to him in the world of action, he was thrown back upon the world of books for all of pleasure or of ambition he had in life. That one ambition, and that only, was left to the man who bore the brand of crime. He might hope to write a book that the world would value ; a book that would live when his blighted life had dropped into an obscure grave ; a book that would be to him as a living thing, the companion of his days and nights, with him as he tramped the dull London streets, with him in his dreams, growing and shaping itself silently, inevitably, in every hour of his existence.

This was the thing for which he had to live, the Galatea of his brain, the statue to be clothed first with beauty, and then with life. Sometimes in the dark wintry afternoon, having eaten his frugal luncheon in the somewhat distant refreshment room, sitting in the drowsy warmth of the book room, waiting for the electric light, George Desmond would lose himself in vague dreams of the future ; sometimes, against his will, his thoughts would take him along the troubled ways of the past, until his soul sank into unutterable gloom.

He looked back and remembered. A luxurious home, first in Hyde Park Gardens, and then at Wargrave. A frivolous young mother, very pretty, very sweet, very fond of him. He could recall the bright bloom in her cheek, the lustre of her large blue eyes ; and then, when he was at a preparatory school at Brighton, the sudden summons, the long, long journey by sea and land, by rail and post-carriage, to receive her dying kiss in a place where the skies were deeply blue, and the hills and valleys white with snow. She had been sent to winter in the Engadine, and died there, a week after the coming of her only child to hold her hand in his, and listen to her laboured breathing, and wipe the death-dews from her forehead.

Then came Eton, and its joys and sorrows. He had done well there, especially well in classics, and so Balliol had been prescribed, and he had done well at Balliol ; and in that happy life, with no restrictions as to money, he had never thought of questioning the sources of his father's income, and had never doubted the permanence of a state of things that had existed ever since he could remember.

His surroundings had always suggested affluence ; and he had grown up with the fixed idea that his father was a rich man. He was spoken of vaguely as on the Stock Exchange ; but his son knew nothing as to the nature of his risks or the security of his position. He was generous, and even lavish, in his use of money, but his household was unpretentious, his Wargrave home a comfortable old house with comfortable old servants. There was no display in stables, or hot-houses, no vying with the new millionaires whose mansions rose like Aladdin palaces along the riverside or towered high above the neighbouring woods. He rather affected a perfection in detail than a large splendour, and the impression his establishment made upon the neighbourhood was of refined taste and absolute solidity.

George remembered all this, and remembered the shock it had been to him when an Oxford friend, whose father was an old-established stockbroker, hinted that things were not well with Mr. Desmond in the City, and on being questioned confessed that he had heard of heavy losses made by Desmond and Farrowgate, and the general opinion that there must be a financial crash before long.

"I thought stockbrokers ran no risks—only bought and sold for their clients, on commission," the young man said; whereupon his friend shrugged his shoulders, and told him that Desmond and Farrowgate were not brokers, but jobbers, and had always played a bold game.

"Your father is magnificent at finance," he said, "and he has had marvellous luck in his time; but I'm afraid things have been going to the bad for the last year or two."

For the last year or two! And this was the first warning note that had sounded in George Desmond's ear. He had been spending his father's money. There had been no hint of shortage. He had revelled in the joyous Oxford life, had roamed about the Continent in the long vacation. And here was ruin staring him in the face—ruin for the kind father, who at sixty years of age would be smitten hard by loss of fortune, and still harder if with poverty and loss of status there should come something of disgrace.

He hurried home, and found an empty house. The master had left for the Continent on important business. The trusted man-servant had labelled his portmanteaux for Paris, and had seen him off at Charing Cross, but he understood that his master was going farther than Paris, and was likely to be absent for some time.

Three days afterwards the crash came, like an earthquake. The house of Desmond and Farrowgate sank into the great dismal swamp of bank-

ripty. The partners were hammered, the offices were to let. The house at Wargrave was sold by auction, with all its contents ; and George Desmond found himself alone in the world, homeless, with a hundred or so to his credit at his Oxford bankers. He had been reading hard for "greats" in those last terms, and had spent less than usual. He was able to go back and take his degree, a better one than he might have achieved had this misfortune not awakened him from his dream of youth, and aged his mind and feelings by at least ten years. He looked at life after that shock as a man of thirty might look, knowing its vast capacity for misery, the sudden turns of Fate, the mutability of things that seem permanent.

While he was at Oxford a letter came to him from his father from Paris, a far more hopeful letter than he had expected to receive. The bankrupt speculator saw his way to retrieving his position, possibly to paying his creditors in full, or in any event to satisfying them. He had some idea of establishing a business in Scotland, where he had powerful friends in the financial world ; but as his bankruptcy was still unsettled, he would return secretly, under an assumed name, and not show his cards till he was certain of success. He asked his son to meet him in Edinburgh, and gave the probable date of his arrival, and the name of the somewhat obscure and second-rate hotel at which he would stay.

George Desmond rejoiced, but with trembling ; recovery after such utter ruin seemed almost too much to hope for.

But he loved his father, and obeyed implicitly. He did not like the assumed name ; he did not like his father's altered appearance. The handsome beard and moustache had disappeared, and the face, clean shaved, and more careworn than of old, seemed a different face, the face of another man,

anxious, crafty, yet with a power of assuming the old air of *bonhomie*, the placid assurance of a man with whom all things are going well.

And now began a vast and audacious series of frauds involving large sums of money, an amount of plunder rarely realized with such rapidity, or with so fair a prospect of success. There were two other men associated with Desmond and Farrowgate in the conspiracy, men who had once been reputable members of the Paris Bourse, and who knew the machinery of Continental finance, men who had the manners and appearance of gentlemen, together with a tone of authority, the man-of-the-world air, which imposes upon inexperienced youth. George accepted them as his father's friends, by whose aid Desmond and Farrowgate were to be set upon their legs again, and their creditors honourably dealt with, if not paid in full.

Weeks and months passed after George's meeting with his father at the shabby Edinburgh hotel. Desmond and Farrowgate and their allies went backwards and forwards between London and the Continent. Banking accounts were opened in assumed names in London and Paris. Engravers were at work in both cities ; engravers of the finest skill and the broadest views, who could be trusted, and who asked no questions. Foreign bonds of large amounts were cashed, and American bonds were bought. In all these transactions the assistance of an innocent accomplice was of the utmost value, and Desmond, confident of success, did not scruple to make use of his only son, the son whom he loved.

He looked forward to a time near at hand when he and George would both have shaken the London dust off their feet, and would have begun life in America, the world of wider enterprise and bigger

fortunes. He saw himself one of the Money-kings of the new world. George Desmond threaded the labyrinth of lies, unconscious of evil. He did what his father told him to do. He was to go to this or that bank, to pay in securities, or to draw out money for re-investment. When he showed some wonder at the largeness of the amounts he was dealing with, his father told him that they represented the capital of the newly organized firm of Desmond, Farrowgate & Company, which was to be financed by a triple millionaire, who chose to remain in the background, and whose name was to be kept dark till the business—on entirely new lines—was established. It was to be altogether a new departure in finance, and was to fall upon the London Stock Exchange like a thunderbolt. So plausible were his father and his father's partner, Farrowgate, that George never for a moment suspected evil, and it was not till his father was arrested at Havre, that he knew he had been an actor in a conspiracy of fraud, an innocent accomplice in a criminal scheme which for cleverness and audacity rose high above ordinary crime.

Farrowgate and the two other men were caught in different places, one in Paris, one in Jersey, Farrowgate at Liverpool while stepping on to the tender that was to carry him to an American steamer; but for some days after his father's arrest George Desmond was free, and did not know how deeply he was incriminated by the part he had played in the drama. He had a long and painful interview with his father while the case was before the magistrate, and the prisoners were on remand, and at his father's urgent entreaty he consented to take charge of a certain cash-box then in possession of a lady in that half-world, where honour among thieves is the basis of the moral code. This lady was to hand the box over to George, on receipt of a letter from his father, and George was then to

find a hiding-place that would baffle the police, should they get wind of the matter and make a rigorous search.

Desmond assured his son that the box contained papers of no value except to himself, and that in consenting to put it in a place of safety, he was not adding one jot to his father's burden of guilt, and George undertook this mission, but with intense reluctance. He could not harden his heart against the father from whom he had never known anything but affection and indulgence ; therefore, difficult and unsatisfactory as the work was, he set about it with his best thought and care.

It seemed to him that the only place of safety would be the most unlikely place for the concealment of any object of value ; and the disused subterranean passage at Lorringford, which he had known as a lad, was to his mind a *cache* that could hardly occur to the most astute detective in connection with the man known as John Clarkson, who stood charged with forgery and fraud.

Lorringford had been unoccupied for years, and from its neglected condition, was likely to remain empty, nor in the event of a new tenant was it probable that the long disused passage would undergo change of any kind. George Desmond believed that he had hit upon the safest hiding-place within the four seas. If he had been deceived and the cash-box contained securities representing stolen money, George trusted that he might later prevail upon his father to make restitution.

His own arrest, as he was leaving the court after his father's second appearance at Bow Street, came as a thunderclap ; and then followed the long and dreary days of waiting for the end, with all the horrors of the felon's progress to the dock, the cell at Wandsworth, the prison van, examination and cross-examination of witnesses, adjournment after adjournment, giving time to bring new witnesses

from distant places, and finally conviction for the five prisoners, John Clarkson, his son Edward Clarkson, William Mannington, Jean Duplessis and Victor Blond.

Neither Farrowgate nor his partner were identified under their assumed names, so different were the careworn faces and bent shoulders of the men who stood in a frozen silence, while link after link in the chain of fraud was gradually brought together, from the handsome well set-up City men with their pleasant surroundings and troops of friends.

Among those troops of friends there may have been some who knew the old faces under their altered aspect; but if so, they were too merciful to make any use of their knowledge. The two Desmonds and Farrowgate appeared at the Old Bailey as John and Edward Clarkson and William Mannington; and under those names all three prisoners were condemned to penal servitude for life.

For life! It was not often that so severe a sentence was passed upon a gang of forgers; but these forgeries had been executed upon a grand scale, and the punishment was on the same level.

Sitting in the drowsy warmth of the reading-room, where ceaseless footsteps passed and repassed with a deadened sound on the thick floorcloth, and where subdued voices rose and fell like the murmur of far-off winds, George Desmond recalled the dull despair that numbed his brain when he heard his sentence pronounced.

The judge had put in a kindly word for the younger prisoner, suggesting that he might have been under the influence of his father, and that it was even possible that he had not been admitted to the confidence of the conspirators, and had acted in good faith. But a jury of commercial men would consider no extenuating plea for criminals who had

got possession of over a hundred thousand pounds, while no portion of the securities into which they had converted their plunder had been recovered by the police.

Five years in Dartmoor, five years that had been as long as twenty. Days of hard labour and sickening monotony, with the same uncongenial task, and with the warder's loaded gun waiting ready to fire at the first indication of an attempt to escape. Nights that were sleepless till in the cold hour of dawn the tortured mind succumbed to the body's weakness, and the tired frame lay like a log, dead to thought and feeling, till the prison bell ended that brief respite from memory and pain. The killing monotony, the crushing sense of undeserved disgrace, these were hard to suffer; and with this burden of sorrow there was in George Desmond's mind an aching pity for the man whose crime had blighted his life. He knew the agony of remorse that his father suffered when he awoke from his guilty dream of gold, of new and brilliant fortunes in a new land, and saw himself the murderer of his son's good name, and of his life. To have doomed his own flesh and blood to the living death of penal servitude, at the least possible measure twenty years of exile from all that the world has of happiness or of good, twenty years of the life that changes a man into a machine, if it doesn't change him into a fiend. To look at his son in the exercise yard, clad in the livery of crime, hair cropped close by the prison barber, face of ashen hue, lips compressed, eyes from which all colour seemed to have faded, to see him thus, and to recall the handsome youth coming from Oxford, flushed with victory on the river or in the cricket field, full of high spirits, and with the fine, frank outlook of the man who has never feared the face of his fellow-men! Here was an agony to shorten life, and Henry Desmond's

strength decayed from the day he entered those halls of despair, where a hundred years before his time the war prisoners had eaten their hearts amidst the desolation of an unknown world, a place of grey hills and wide tracts of swamps and bog, where the skies were duller, and the winds colder, than the winds and skies of France.

The paralytic stroke which ended his active share in that dreary life and made him an inmate of the infirmary, was a merciful dispensation. Here his son was allowed to visit him occasionally; until after a time, on the strength of unexceptionable behaviour, George Desmond was privileged to spend the greater part of his days in that quiet back-water of prison life, reading to his father, and to other sick men, whose last hours he lightened by the kindness that comes of understanding and sympathy. Henry Desmond's intellect remained almost unimpaired to the end, and he was able to plead for pardon from the son he had so deeply wronged. He had no excuse to offer for his own misdeeds. He, who swore he could not have robbed an individual of a shilling to save himself from starvation, had felt very little compunction in taking an active part in a plot to rob a great bank of a hundred thousand pounds. The magnitude of the prize had dazzled him. From the time of his bankruptcy he had been haunted by the idea that he only wanted capital to begin a new game upon a grander scale, and to achieve a grander result. He was a man of sanguine temperament, with much superficial cleverness, but incapable of sustained thought; and it may be that the nature of his business in past years, the company-promoting, the nursing of companies that were only companies on paper, the broken-backed schemes to extract money from a gullible public, had prepared him to lend a yielding ear to the tempter when he was invited to employ his active brain and his long

experience of financial enterprise in a daring series of frauds by means of forged bills of exchange.

It was not till within a few days of his death that he told his son the secret of the hidden cash-box.

“Some day, perhaps, you may get out of this place,” he said. “Men have escaped in years past. Not many ; but it has been done. If you do—you will not have to face life without the sinews of war. The box you put away for me contains my share of the securities that you helped us to buy. You remember—the American bonds that you bought from different brokers—as I instructed you.”

“Yes, I remember. Even to my inexperience it seemed rather a complicated business ; buying from a number of brokers, rather than from one.”

“Ah, you see we had to keep our investments dark. Those bonds are liquid money—as good as gold. We made an honest division ; and that box contains twenty-five thousand pounds.”

“Stolen money ! Can you believe that I could either keep it or spend it ?”

“My dear lad, what would be the good of giving it up ? The bank has swallowed the loss. No one that you or I need care for will ever be a penny the poorer. Nobody would thank you for restoring a quarter of the money. And with your fine brain, and that amount of capital to start with, there is no position in the financial world to which you might not aspire.”

And in those quiet hours in the infirmary, when father and son were allowed to converse apart, unmarked and unheard, George realized the cruel truth that the father he had loved and trusted in all the days of his youth, whose generous indulgence had made those early years so happy and so smooth, had never been an honest man, had been from the

beginning of his business life a reckless speculator, gambling with the fortunes of other people ; when lucky in his ventures, a beneficent power ; but even in his most successful enterprises leaving a trail of loss behind him, perhaps the ruin of original shareholders, left out in the cold ; a man of the true happy-go-lucky temperament, whose commercial motto was that somebody must go to the wall ; a man who for over thirty years had stood high among the inventors of money, till the crash came, and the losers crowded to the front, and his admirers admitted ruefully that nobody can invent money. There must always be those who pay the piper ; that inexorable piper whose law is that two and two make four and can by no means, honest or dishonest, ever make twenty.

In those quiet hours, pleading with the man who was so soon to pass from things seen—Stock-exchanges, limited liability companies, loss and gain—to things unseen, the things that his mind had never contemplated, George found that fraud was ingrained in his father's thoughts, that the practice of years had fashioned the brain of the man, and that remorse for crime was only regret for the fate of the son he loved. To his last day of consciousness he entreated George to make use of his hidden wealth, and to have no compunction about the source of his fortune.

" It may help you to escape," he said. " If you can persuade one of these men that you have large means in reserve, you may get helped out of prison."

Then came the sad day of unconsciousness, and the last quiet sleep ; and after his father's death captivity had become more intolerable to the innocent prisoner ; for now he had no one to pity, no one to live for. The governor, the chaplain, and the doctor, had all been kind to him during his father's long illness. His patience and refinement

had won their regard, and though he had troubled them with no protestations of his innocence, these men who had seen much of him were all disposed to believe his father's story that he had been not a criminal, but a victim.

## CHAPTER V.

IT was late in December, and the idea of a Christmas Festival, a period of universal peace and joy, had for some time taken a visible shape, and brightened the shop windows even in those obscure streets which George Desmond threaded on his daily progress to and from the Museum.

Desmond's heart sickened at the thought of Christmas, and all the memories it brought, memories of his father's buoyant temper, rejoicing in the assembling of his friends, a brimming house-party, a crowded dinner table, too much of everything, the overflowing of careless luxury, lavish gifts to servants, big subscriptions to charities, the unconsidered bounteousness of the man who believes he can invent money. Many of George's undergraduate friends had tasted that lavish hospitality. Henry Desmond had loved to keep open house, being one of those men who shine and expand in society, and who can ill support solitude. George had the key to that exuberant nature now; and he knew that in a career such as his father's, a man shrinks from serious thought and hates solitude. To sit at the head of his table and tell good stories of City life and self-made men, to hear the undergraduates' joyous laugh, as the good wine went round and the young voices grew louder, had meant respite from care. Sufficient for the day was the evil thereof, had been Mr. Desmond's

favourite text ; and that carelessness about to-morrow had given him an air of unfading youth, and the charm of manner that the undergraduates loved.

On that December evening George Desmond was passing through the glare of unshaded gas in a poult erer's window when a woman laid her hand upon his arm.

" Mr. Desmond ! I can't be mistaken."

He stopped dead, and they stood looking at each other. He knew the woman, a woman who had " passed as " Farrowgate's wife. That was the usual description by which he had heard of her. She had never crossed the threshold of his home ; but his father had pointed her out to him with a kind of scornful amusement on several occasions : on the river, with Farrowgate in a steam launch ; the Sunday river, when all the world and his wife, and not wife, are afloat ; another time on a coach at Windsor ; and again in a London theatre ; and again at the Derby in a noisy company on a drag. She was a woman of exceeding beauty, of so superb a type that even want of education, and an ingrained vulgarity of mind and speech, could not utterly spoil her charm. Slang in such a woman passed for eccentricity, and vulgarity suggested a sense of humour, and to a certain class of man her attractiveness was of magnetic force. Farrowgate had been her slave, had lavished his hazardous gains upon her caprices, had grown bolder, and plunged deeper into the whirlpool of finance, solely to satisfy her longings for things that were beyond the reach of other women — more expensive lodgings, finer clothes, blood-horses, extravagant parties at which to outshine all her guests. If another woman came to Mrs. Farrowgate's dance wearing finer diamonds than Mrs. Farrowgate, the stock-jobber had a bad time

of it all the way from the hired ball-room to the Bayswater lodgings.

It was a face not to be forgotten, and it had played its haunting part in more than one wasted life, had lit the pathway to more than one premature grave. Desmond remembered the woman, though she had changed since her days of prosperity. The face was pinched and haggard, the delicate aquiline outline showed the bird of prey, and the eyes had an unnatural brilliancy. But he knew her as the person for whose sake Farrowgate had cut himself adrift from the world of respectability. His wonder was that she should know him, since they had never exchanged speech or met face to face.

"Oh, come, don't deny your name," she said impatiently. "I was in court all through the trial. I had plenty of time to take stock of you. It was pretty clever of you to give them the slip at your country house in Devonshire. I read all about it in the papers. I wish Farrowgate had been half as clever."

Desmond had walked on quickly, the woman keeping by his side, till they had passed the flaring shops and were in the darker part of the street where there were only lodging-houses and private dwellings, the dressmaker's, the tailor's, the electrical engineer's, the registrar's, a brass plate upon every door.

"Now," said the woman, when they were in this quieter part of the street, "what's become of all the money?"

"Hadn't you better ask Mr. Farrowgate that question?"

"You know as well as I do that he daren't answer. You know there's not a line that wretched bloke can write that won't be read before it leaves the prison. You know where the money was put. You must have had a hand in disposing of it—for you were the only one that had an hour's freedom

after the gaff was blown. I want to know what became of Farrowgate's share. I know it wasn't on him when he was caught. He was a bit too clever to carry the pelf about with him."

"The natural thing would have been to put it in your keeping."

"Don't I know that? He always was a suspicious brute. He led me a hell of a life with his jealousy. I couldn't say a civil word to a gentleman friend without putting his back up; not to one of his own friends, though he ought to have known they were gentlemen. Of course, he ought to have handed the money to me. He might have invested it in my name, where nobody could have been able to lay a finger on a sixpence. But he was too big a fool to do the square thing. And now I want to know what became of those bonds. He showed them to me one night—thousands and thousands. The figures made my head spin. Where are they? Come, Desmond, you know."

"I know nothing of Mr. Farrowgate's affairs."

"Oh, come, you were with him in prison."

"I never had private speech with him."

"Hadn't you? But before that—when they were all at Wandsworth on remand. You had private speech with them then, and they told you where to find the money, and where to hide it."

"I had speech with no one but my father—an interview of five minutes, when by an accident we were left alone."

"Long enough for him to tell you about the money—a good bit of it was my money—owed me by Farrowgate, some of it money I lent him after the crash, money I'd laid by."

"I'm sorry you should be a loser by your kindness to Mr. Farrowgate; but I can give you no help in the matter."

"Oh, you're mighty cool about it, Mr. Desmond, alias Clarkson; but how would you like me to go

straight off to Scotland Yard, and tell them where they can find the runaway from Dartmoor ? ”

“ It is within your power to ruin my life ; but I don’t think that’s worth your doing.”

“ There’d be the reward, at any rate.”

“ I don’t think there was any reward offered. Scotland Yard is against rewards.”

“ I’ll look into that.”

“ You had better do so. My misery would lie easier on your conscience if you were well paid for it ; but to spoil my life gratis would be wasted wickedness.”

“ Where does the wickedness come in ? You’ve broken the law, haven’t you, in getting out of prison ? It’s my duty to inform against you.”

“ You know that I never ought to have entered that prison. You know that I knew nothing of what was being done when I went about the City at my father’s orders.”

“ That’s rather hard to swallow. You must have been greener than they make ‘em if you didn’t understand what was up.”

“ I was an honest man.”

“ An honest man can give a straight answer to a straight question. What did you do with Farrowgate’s money ? ”

“ I have told you already that I had nothing to do with Farrowgate or his property. I never saw him after the bankruptcy.”

“ Then what on earth did he do with it ? ”

“ I can’t even help you with a suggestion, since I know nothing of his habits or of his acquaintance.”

“ Well, at any rate you must have got your father’s share of the swag, and that must have made you a rich man. You can help me with a hundred or so, and not feel it.”

“ It is out of my power to help you with a five-pound note, as I am living from hand to mouth, by

my own industry—in a not very remunerative profession."

The woman looked at him vindictively, and the luminous violet eyes that had been once admired were now only terrible.

"You know you're lying," she said. "You must have that money."

"If I had it all at my lodgings in a heap of gold, I wouldn't spend or give away a single sovereign to save myself from starvation."

"What would you do with it?"

"Carry it straight to the bank where I cashed the forged bills that Farrowgate and his foreign accomplices helped to manufacture."

"And you think I believe that bosh?"

"I don't care a straw whether you do or do not. And now I must wish you good-night. I have some distance to go."

He was within three doors of the admirable Dodd's, but it had occurred to him that he need not allow Mrs. Farrowgate to find out his address without taking a little trouble.

"How far are you going?"

"To Shepherd's Bush."

"Is that where you live?"

"After your playful threat just now, I must refuse to give you my address."

"Suppose I take the trouble to follow you home?"

"If you do, you may be sure I'll make the business as troublesome as I can. I could afford you an amusing chase upon the underground, between station and station."

"If you provoke me too much, I shall give you in charge to the first policeman I can see. He'll snap at such a chance."

"You had better think twice about that. You are very nicely dressed. You look as if the world were using you rather well. How would you like

the kind of advertisement that you would get in the newspapers if you made yourself conspicuous by informing against me ? ”

Mrs. Farrowgate by no means resembled the violet that hides among its leaves ; but she had a holy horror of the newspapers, when it was a question of her own character and antecedents, racy as she had found the reports of certain cases in which her dearest friends had figured.

Desmond saw that she was impressed.

“ Good-night,” he said briefly, as he lifted his hat, and then quickened his pace and left the lady stranded.

He looked back at the first turning, to see if she was following him, but she was no longer in sight. She had evidently turned westward, in which direction she was walking when they met ; so he was free to retrace his steps, and let himself in at Miss Dodd’s spotless doorway.

It had been far from a pleasant meeting, and it had reminded him of the peril in which he walked the streets of London. For the first time since he had crept away from the quarry under a curtain of fog, he had been recognized and threatened with recapture. Till to-night his good luck had given him impunity ; but now he had to reckon with an unscrupulous woman, whose associates might be a good deal worse than herself, and practised in all the nefarious arts of the blackmailer.

He shifted his tent next day, regretfully leaving Miss Dodd’s peerless lodgings, and took rooms on the Surrey side of Westminster Bridge, in a dull little street leading out of the York Road, and under the shadow of a mighty brewery. The rooms were inferior in every way to the admirable Dodd’s, but they were clean, and the fact that he had a longer walk to the Museum was not a disadvantage, as this daily tramp to and fro was his only form of exercise.

He had avoided any personal contact with the editors of the newspapers and magazines where his contributions had been received with favour, availing himself of Mark Lister, as his agent, in all business arrangements, and using the house in Fitzroy Square as an address. Mark was delighted to help him, and almost as proud of his facility and his success as if one of his own gigantic canvases had been hung on the line in Burlington House or bought by the Chantrey trustees.

“It’s wonderful how you have sprung your stuff upon them,” Lister said. “Beauminster of the *Orb* was tremendously interested about you. People had been talking of that last paper you sent them, and he’ll take as many more as you like in the same vein. He tried to pump me; thought you must be an elderly man who had spent his life in a library, like Isaac Disraeli. He said there was thought in your stuff.”

“I had plenty of time for thought where I was. Prince Town was a quiet retreat, if it wasn’t quite as luxurious as Disraeli’s library.”

“A good idea, wasn’t it—an elderly man—an original—an eccentric! George Desmond, who less than six years ago was stroke of his college boat!”

“You can tell him he is right. I live in a library. You needn’t tell him that I share it with all the impecunious scribblers in London.”

For a fairly educated young man, who had made himself master of four modern languages, and who had no world to live in except a world of books, a certain success in literature was not difficult. George Desmond made his mark among the new essayists with ease, for he was more original than most of them. His thoughts were his own thoughts, and his manner was his own manner. He had none of the turns of phrase that are the fashion of the hour, and that come in and go out like the shapes of women’s sleeves, or the collars of men’s

coats. While giving the greater part of his days to reading he had no difficulty in earning enough to pay for his lodgings and abstemious fare, to rig himself out in decent clothes, and even to save money. He had plans for the future where a little extra cash would be necessary. He wanted to travel, to see men and cities, mountains and forests, tropical oceans and romantic islands ; all that there is of beauty and of strangeness on the earth. His plans were inchoate as yet ; but he had his dreams of a fuller life than the daily tramp through the London streets, and the long hours under the great dome.

## CHAPTER VI.

MAY was being elbowed out by her lovelier sister June, but the wild hyacinths were still blue in the woodland glades at Lorriford, and a row of hawthorns in fullest flower, dancing down a verdant hillside, had the air of a bridal procession, white-robed nymphs following the bride to a forest altar.

"I wonder if this is really the loveliest of all Lorriford's phases," said Mrs. Warden, who was no less enthusiastic about the place than when she bought it, a mark of a very strong mind; for the general feeling after a year of possession is apt to be a certain staleness, a vague disappointment, an involuntary questioning of the wisdom of the purchase; or perhaps a foolish hankering after the abandoned home.

"Then you are not tired of the place?" Muriel asked with something of surprise.

"Tired! Don't we both adore it?"

"I suppose we do. There could hardly be a prettier house for two lone lorn women—large enough and not too large—and no ghost to scare us out of the best bedroom," concluded Muriel, yawning.

Now to yawn at breakfast-time was an offence in Mrs. Warden's sight. She was a woman of inexhaustible energy, who could sit up reading or playing patience till after midnight, and come down, fresh as an elderly rose, to a nine o'clock breakfast.

"I hope you don't call the place dull," she said, with an offended air.

"I don't think anybody could call it lively."

"What nonsense! When you have any number of nice neighbours."

"The nearest is three miles off."

"Croquet parties, tennis parties, dinner parties. You are really very ungrateful. Very few girls are asked to as many dinners."

"Why should I be grateful? The people only invite me because they think I may marry one of their boorish sons, and that you will give me a lot of money."

Muriel was out of humour with life. Her plan of a private secretary for her grandmother had been a dismal failure. An elderly man, with every possible qualification, and highly recommended by a neighbouring bishop, had proved utterly incapable of coping with the tradespeople, or managing the servants, and had bored Muriel and her grandmother until the mere common Christian duty of asking him to luncheon on Sunday had been a Saturday nightmare. On his telling her that his lodgings at the Lock House had exacerbated his chronic rheumatism, Mrs. Warden had presented him with a year's salary, and they had parted friends; and from that time there had been no further talk of a secretary, Muriel having declared that it was better to be plundered than to be bored.

Lorrington itself had not lost its charm for Muriel. The gardens and woods, the park-like meadows, through which she rambled on summer mornings, singing aloud in her joy, like Tennyson's Maud, were as lovely in her eyes as when first she trod the soil and called it her own.

"Ours," as she said to her grandmother, "our own dear fields and hedgerows, our own woods and hillside, almost our own river!"

And after this outburst she knelt and kissed the greensward in a childish ecstasy.

Those sudden raptures had ceased with familiarity ; but the place was not less beautiful, or less dear. It was the place of her own choosing, the joyous place that laughed in the sunshine, glorified by blue water that doubled the blue brightness of summer skies. The grave old house at Framber in the grave old park, with its formal avenue, and stag-headed oaks that seemed gloomy even at mid-summer, had suggested nothing but melancholy after the cheery old grandfather had vanished from the scene. The Park was too large, and too flat, the trees were too old, the house was too far aloof from human kind. But charmed though she was with Lorriford, Muriel was not quite satisfied. The girl-mind of seventeen years is capricious, and a shade fantastic ; and one of its innate and irrepressible longings is the desire for change, the wanting something to happen ; the yearning for new emotions, the unexpected, the unknown, strange faces, sudden developments.

The smooth monotony that age loves, the to-morrow that is like to-day, leaves youth unsatisfied. Everybody in the little world round Lorriford was kind and pleasant and neighbourly, and hospitality was given for hospitality, cutlet for cutlet. Mrs. Warden's boy and girl dance in December had borne a harvest of boy and girl dances in January and February. Muriel had been admired and petted, and had received more than one offer of marriage from stammering, blushing youths still at Sandhurst or Woolwich, or grinding with some famous crammer for Civil Service at home or abroad. But after nearly a year in the new home she knew every face within twenty miles, knew what every party would be like, what the men would talk about and how the women would be dressed, and even what the dinner would be like, where there would be

the best Nesselrode pudding and the newest desserts—the only items seventeen cares about.

She knew them all by heart, the people and the things. She had her dear friends amongst them, the girls with whom she played hockey in winter and tennis and croquet in summer, and with whom she laughed at the foolish young men. She was not really tired of them. She would have been sorry if any of them had died or gone away. But she wanted something else, something startling, something dramatic.

The dramatic happened, when she had begun to despair of it; and the drama was very near being a tragedy that would have broken a warm young heart.

It was early in July after a rainy June, and there had been floods in several places along the Thames Valley. There had been floods about Lorryngford, and the river had been a turbulent stream that taxed Muriel's strong young arms to the uttermost, and her grandmother would not allow her to set foot in either of her boats without Peacock, the waterman, to help her row. She had become an expert with sculls and punt pole, after a year's experience, and thought herself invincible in skiff or canoe, and she was inclined to resent all grandmotherly caution. She was not afraid of the swirling water, and she did not mind hard work on the river she adored. And to have a clumsy middle-aged man pretending to help her, and even presuming to direct her course, was almost too much for her patience.

"I suppose if I were going up in a balloon you would send the butler to take care of me," she said. "Just consider Peacock's weight in the boat, and what a treat it must be to have him."

Now that July had come with a tropical sun and a soft west wind, the waters were supposed to have resumed their placid course, and Muriel was allowed to dispense with Peacock's services. Not content with taking her own pleasure on the river, she

coaxed her grandmother to occupy her accustomed seat in the skiff for the first time since the rising of the waters in early June.

It was one of those exquisite mornings when it is a joy to live, just to live, and to bask in the delicious warmth, and drink the pure air, and look with dreaming eyes upon the dazzling landscape, and forget whether one is old or young, rich or poor, to cast off the shackles of worldly care, and to know what life must be to the birds and the butterflies, and all the happy things that can neither think nor remember.

Mrs. Warden, in her heart of hearts, had an inordinate admiration for Muriel's accomplishments on the water. The girl seemed to her a supernatural creature, who might have been the daughter of a river god; therefore, when she was told that the floods were over and all things propitious, she stepped lightly into the skiff and took her comfortable seat in the stern—proud of her usefulness in steering the light craft.

She was almost as fond of the river as Muriel was, and she was a woman to whom the idea of danger to herself rarely occurred. She knew fear only for the precious things she loved, and since her husband's death her love had been centred in this one bright being, who sat smiling at her, and tugging her sculls through the hurrying water.

"My dear Muriel," she said presently, in rather an alarmed voice, "you told me the floods had gone down."

"So they have, Grannie. There's only the lowest meadow under water."

"But the stream is running awfully fast."

"You didn't notice it last week, perhaps, or you'd think it a mill pond."

"I wish you'd take the boat back to the steps, Muriel. I'm afraid it's too much for your strength to pull against such a stream."

"Dear Grannie, what a baby you must think me."

She had rolled up the sleeves of her muslin blouse, and her grandmother could see the bright blue veins swelling under the white skin, as the round arms strained at their work.

"Muriel, I insist on your going back," Mrs. Warden said severely, after some uncomfortable minutes.

"Skittles, Gran, skit, skit, skittles! I'm going to take you as far as the Lock House, and then we'll let the stream carry us back. They've got a new lodger. I daresay he'll be in the garden sketching, or reading the newspaper, and we can see what kind of creature he is. Lucille called him 'un tout jeune homme.'"

Lucille was her own particular maid, warranted Parisian, who had been engaged to improve the young lady's conversational French, but who so far had only succeeded in improving her own English, by conversing with her mistress in that tongue.

Muriel was pulling harder and harder. The sweet young lips tightened into a hard line; her breath came fast through dilated nostrils. As she neared the lock she found it all she could do to hold the boat straight against the seething waters. She was scarcely making perceptible headway in the rushing current, and the rudder could no longer help her. Then, still straining at her work, she began to feel that she was in difficulties—yes, even in great peril of her boat being driven round in the eddying tide, swept under the drooping boughs of the trees, or over some sunken branch, and swamped or capsized. Had she been alone she would have laughed at the danger, proudly conscious of her strength, as a swimmer who had won silver candlesticks and inkstands at the Bath Club. But to risk the adored grandmother's life, from sheer fool-hardiness!

“I ought not to have tried it, I ought not, I ought not,” she kept repeating dumbly, in her throbbing brain ; while the dear face looked at her calmly, gravely, and the peril momentarily increased. And then, seeing the agonized expression, and suddenly conscious of danger, her grandmother lost her head and pulled the wrong cord, when Muriel, beaten by the strength of the stream, had hoped to get the boat round again ; then moved in her seat first to one side then to the other. In a moment the boat turned, and, broadside across the stream, was swept back, rocking violently. Again Mrs. Warden, now seized with panic, made a movement, unreasoning instinct impelling her to fatal movement as the boat oscillated more and more. A cry of despair from Muriel, and the boat had overturned, and they were both in the river.

“Don’t be frightened, Gran. Oh, darling, darling, I’m holding you, I’ll get you safe ashore.”

Oh, the despair, the agony of self-reproach in moments that seemed ages, when the awful sense of impending doom froze her young blood. In an instant, in the midst of the freshness and the glory of youth, she saw herself face to face with an appalling tragedy, the loss of this precious life, which was ever so much dearer to her than her own. What high-spirited girl of seventeen fears death ? She has hardly learnt that mere existence is something inestimable, something to hold as the one good. Seventeen is the age of suicide, the reckless flinging away of life for a caprice, a sweetheart’s quarrel, a fit of temper. Had Muriel been seized with cramp, and felt herself drowning, she would have sighed, “Poor darling Grannie, how sorry she will be ! ” and would have gone down through the deep water with little more concern than a mermaid, whose element it was.

But to know her dearest and best in peril, and to be impotent to save ! Her strong young voice

went up in a piercing shriek, the wild cry of despair—“Help, help, help!”

The cry rang out silver clear; and a stronger voice answered:

“I’m coming. Keep hold of her.”

A plunge, a splash, and a hand had gripped Mrs. Warden’s gown, and a strong arm had lifted her head out of the water. A woman rushed out of the Lock House, a man and a boy ran to the bank. No one had heard anything till Muriel’s cry. Help would have come sooner had she shrieked when the boat capsized, but in the first two or three dreadful minutes she had trusted to her own strength—she, who had won inkstands for heroic rescues in swimming baths, clad in heavier clothes than she wore to-day. She had trusted to her own strength till her grandmother’s persistency in sinking froze her heart with frantic fear, and her cry went out to the sky, the earth, the water, as if its wild appeal invoked even supernatural aid.

The aid had come on the instant. Strength and youth were helping her. The strong arms of a strong swimmer bore Mrs. Warden to the bank; and Muriel with feebler strokes got herself ashore somehow, and dropped on the grass in a dead faint.

The young man carried his dripping burden into the Lock House, and gave her into his landlady’s charge; and then ran back to the bank, picked up the unconscious girl, and carried her to the sitting-room, where her grandmother was lying on a sofa struggling back to life, assisted by the lock-keeper’s wife, who had considerable experience of half-drowned patients.

“It is Mrs. Warden, the lady at Lorringford Place,” she said. “She’s coming to as fast as she can, sir.”

Desmond placed Muriel in a low armchair, the chair in which it was his habit to sit reading till

deep into the night, his ear delighting in the ripple of the stream or the faint stir of wind-shaken leaves.

She opened her eyes and stared wildly round.

“Grannie!” she cried, struggling to her feet. “Is she safe?”

“Quite safe, my dear,” Mrs. Warden answered, in a feeble voice. “Give her some of that brandy, please, Mrs. Hawker.”

“Oh, I thought you were going to drown. I thought I had murdered you!” and then turning to Desmond, she looked at him with eyes that expressed something that was almost worship. “You saved her! Oh, how can I ever be grateful enough? What can I ever do to prove my gratitude?”

She ended her speech in a burst of hysterical sobbing, and then, recovering herself with a great effort, she added in a calmer voice:

“It’s foolish of me to cry, but I thought I had murdered her. I could only have gone to the bottom after her. I couldn’t have lived another hour, not another minute. Oh, Grannie, Grannie, how good of God, and—this gentleman—to save us.”

She rushed across the room and knelt by the sofa, kissing her grandmother’s cold hands.

“And now you’ll die of the chill—or the shock,” she cried. “Oh, please, give her some more brandy.”

Mrs. Hawker had brought wood and coals and was lighting a fire.

“If you could put on some of my clothes, ma’am,” she faltered, with a deep reverence for the wet lady’s reputed wealth.

“I’ll run to the house and fetch Mrs. Warden’s maid,” Desmond said, and was off before anyone could reply.

He shook himself like a dog, and then ran as fast as he could, along the bank, across the croquet lawns, on his useful errand. His boating flannels

were nearly dry by the time he reached the house, ringing a loud bell, at that lower door by which he had entered more than six years ago in the autumn fog.

A footman strolled in a leisurely manner to answer the summons, and found the stranger in the hall.

Desmond gave his instructions, and a call-bell was rung vehemently, whereon a middle-aged, comfortable-looking person in a black gown came running into the hall.

“Miss Hammond’s maid had better come with me,” she said, having been told of the young lady’s immersion, and Desmond ran back to reassure the two ladies, who had been carefully attended in the meanwhile.

They had left his sitting-room, and were reposing under heaped-up blankets in Mrs. Hawker’s ancient four-post bed, there to await the arrival of the maids. Desmond had nothing further to do for their welfare; and being now sun-dried, like a Valencia grape, he thought the best thing he could do for himself was to take his dinghy and row up to his favourite water-side inn, and not to return to his own quarters till the evening.

It was six o’clock when he took possession of the old-fashioned parlour, in which he had established himself with a good supply of books and foolscap paper ten days previously. He had known the Lock House when he was an undergraduate, and knew that he could be comfortably lodged there. It was a convenient place to live in while he discovered what changes had happened at Lorriford, and whether the box he had secreted there had remained undisturbed.

He had his fixed idea of what ought to be done with that hidden wealth. In this respect his mind was iron.

He found his sitting-room swept and garnished. All traces of his watery guests had vanished. Mrs.

Hawker was one of those indefatigable women whose working power is measured only by the need of her work. Everything that was damp had been made dry. She had starched and ironed the chintz covers of chairs and sofa. She had cleared the fireplace of cinders and ashes, and replaced the jar of cottage flowers that was its summer decoration. Everything was fresh, and bright, and pleasant, in the golden sunlight that shone through a side window facing west, with a view of the Lorrington pastures and woods.

There were two letters lying on the table, letters that had not come by post.

“A footman came with them an hour ago, and was to wait for an answer,” said Mrs. Hawker, as she brought in the teapot.

One letter was large and important-looking, a thick square envelope, with a handsome vermillion seal, crest and monogram. The other envelope was pale mauve, the newest shape, with “Muriel” in silver across the seal, and Desmond was frivolous enough to open this frivolous-looking letter first.

The same silver “Muriel” headed the page.

“DEAR MR. DESMOND,

“I was too much agitated to say anything reasonable to-day, after your unspeakable goodness in saving my beloved grandmother from death; so I cannot refrain from sending you this poor expression of my gratitude. Had you saved *my* life it would have been to me as nothing in comparison with the inextinguishable debt I owe you for having saved her whom I love better than life and whose precious existence my blind folly had hazarded.

“I shall never, never, never forget what you have done for me: how you saved not only her life, but me from suicide or a heart-broken existence. No! I must have ceased to exist. Had this morning’s

accident been fatal to *her*, I could not have gone on living.

“ You cannot know how dear a life I owe you. My mother died when I was almost a baby, and my dearest Grannie has been to me all that the fondest mother could have been. Never shall I cease to thank you for your timely help. An instant’s hesitation on your part, and all might have been over.

“ I hope you may be able to accept Grannie’s invitation for this evening. We should like to show you our dear old house, and the new billiard room. If you are fond of billiards I should be so glad if you would give me a game. People hereabouts are simply impossible.

“ Yours very faithfully,  
“ MURIEL HAMMOND.”

Mrs. Warden’s letter was much shorter.

“ DEAR MR. DESMOND,

“ After our picturesque introduction this morning I hope we are going to be friends as well as neighbours, and that you will allow me to thank you for your invaluable aid by word of mouth.

“ My granddaughter and I will be very glad if you will dine with us this evening, at eight o’clock, when we can discuss the morning’s adventure, which but for your help might have had a fatal termination.

“ Sincerely yours,  
“ BARBARA WARDEN.”

“ Two impulsive women,” he said to himself. “ For all they know I might be a sweep—or a convict,” with a grim smile as the words shaped themselves in his brain.

He refused the dinner invitation, politely, but reserved to himself the privilege of calling on the following afternoon. It would have served him

little to see the house in the evening. There would have been an hour or more at the dinner-table, and another hour in the billiard-room, and then good-night. In the afternoon he could get Muriel to take him about the house and grounds, and to tell him all that had been done there since Mrs. Warden had bought the place.

He had known it passing well ten years before when he was at Eton, and when Sir Harley Gowering's great-nephew had been his favourite chum. Most of his summer vacations had been spent on the river, sculling, punting, sailing, camping out. He knew every rood of ground along the banks between Windsor and Oxford.

Sir Harley was at this time approaching his tenth decade, and lived in his library: not because he cared for books, since newspapers, which his valet read to him, were all of literature that he had ever cared for, but because the room faced south, and gave him the maximum of sunshine. He had been a generous host, and had allowed his daughter and her husband, and his nephews and nieces, and their children, to enjoy free quarters at Lorringford with unstinted hospitality, so long as the juvenile members of his family kept out of earshot, and their elders refrained from worrying him with complaints about his household, or solemn warning as to the extent to which his servants plundered him.

“Good servants always pilfer,” he told his daughter, when she tried to open his eyes to the havoc and devastation in the offices. “I don't want honest incompetence: rustic footmen who would smash my incomparable Venetian glass, or a vastly economical cook, who would poison me with salt butter, or fry my fish twice in the same oil.”

Here Theodore Gowering and his pal George Desmond had enjoyed a summer life without trammels: and one of their various exploits had been to

use the subterranean passage as an American bowling alley. All access to the house had been shut off for many years, but the door leading to the deserted dairy knew neither lock nor bolt ; and the lads had undisturbed possession of dairy and passage. Sir Harley's larder was supplied from the home farm, and the dairy, once his mother's hobby, had long been empty of cream pans and churn ; and all the little ornaments of blue Delft and Derbyshire Spa, which had once embellished the upper shelves, had gone the way of obsolete decoration.

On going to Lorringford the day after the accident Desmond came upon Mrs. Warden and her niece in the garden, the elder lady dozing in a low basket chair, the younger practising long shots at croquet.

Muriel flung down her mallet, and ran to meet him.

“ How good of you to come,” she exclaimed, as they shook hands. “ Grannie is fast asleep, but she'll wake when they bring tea. She is not one bit the worse for the horror of yesterday. I think she rather liked it. You see it was an event ; and as a rule we have no events. I want to thank you again and again and again.”

“ Please never again. You have over-estimated my help. I was delighted to be of use—but when I would have gladly done as much to save a strange dog I feel ashamed of allowing myself to be thanked.”

He picked up her mallet, and handed it to her.

“ Please go on with your practice. I can sit and watch.”

“ Oh, I couldn't possibly. I should do nothing but boss shots. You play croquet, of course.”

“ I blush to admit that I don't even know the moves—or I suppose I ought to say the tactics.”

“ It's a lovely game when one gets to like it.”

“ I believe that is a characteristic of all games—

from chess to shove-halfpenny. One has to get to like them."

A matched pair of footmen, such specimens of manhood in the flower of youth as only wealth can command, brought teatrays and all accompaniments of a luxurious tea, and Mrs. Warden having awakened at their approach, Desmond went to greet her.

"I'm afraid I've been asleep," she said. "A very dull book and a very warm sun were too much for me."

And then she too sang her psalm of thanksgiving to the man who had saved her life. "It's no use your making light of it," she said, when he tried to check her enthusiasm and to turn the conversation. "I shouldn't be sitting in the sunshine to-day if you hadn't pulled me out of the water. That's the long and the short of it. Cream or milk?"

She had settled down to the pleasant task of pouring out tea; and she invited Desmond to a seat beside her.

"Don't wait for my granddaughter," she said, as he hesitated. "If the balls are in an interesting position she won't come till the tea is cold."

Apparently the balls were not interesting, for Muriel came running to the summer-house, and seated herself on her grandmother's right, while Desmond subsided into the chair on her left.

The tea party was sufficiently lively, for Mrs. Warden was a talkative old person, and Muriel was at that age when girls are either dumb or loquacious.

They both wanted to know all about their new acquaintance, not from the snobbish point of view, as to whether he was related to the Irish Desmonds, or the Desmonds in the North of England, or this or that branch of the family to be found in the Peerage or Baronetage. All they were eager to know was about himself as an individual, and a writer of books. Mrs. Hawker had told them that he sat writing for long hours—in the early morning, or in

the dead of night ; that he was in fact that curious being, an author. And Muriel had looked at his books, and had discovered that they were of a graver nature than any books she had ever grappled with, and that some of them were school prizes, and some college prizes, and that many of them were in those two world-famous languages which people value so lightly nowadays.

They wanted to know what he was writing, and above all what he had written, the titles of his books, that they might order them instantly from Lovejoy.

“ There is no book that bears my name in any library, though I hope some day there will be,” he answered. “ For the present I belong to that vast army of scribblers whose books are written in water. So far I am nothing but a journalist—a sort of harlequin of letters—appearing now here, now there, motley as to subjects, though fairly fixed as to opinions.”

“ I hope you are not a horrid Tory,” Mrs. Warden said almost severely.

“ I might better describe myself as a Radical.”

“ Then you and I are not likely to quarrel.”

“ I should not quarrel with a lady even if her opinions were the antipodes of mine. I am not a bigot.”

“ But I am,” said Mrs. Warden, “ and I should quarrel with an archangel if he was a narrow-minded upholder of class distinctions and the advocate of murderous wars.”

“ That sounds as if you were a Little Englander.”

“ Perhaps I am. If prestige is to cost oceans of blood and mountains of gold, I would rather we did without prestige, I would rather we jogged on quietly, teaching our children, and feeding our old people, and with no more armaments than Switzerland has ; and nobody can say that by history and tradition the Swiss are not a fighting people.”

“ And would you let even India go ? ”

“ India ! ” cried Mrs. Warden, almost dropping the teapot. “ Not for the world. India is our crown of glory. All those picturesque peoples, with their different complexions and languages and princes and religions, all owning allegiance to our white King ! *That* is a story that must have no end.”

“ You see what an illogical old person my Grannie is,” said Muriel, who had been occupied with jam sandwiches until now.

“ It is very delightful to find a lady with abstract ideas, even if they don’t quite match one’s own,” said Desmond, “ and I fancy Mrs. Warden and I agree upon most points.”

“ Don’t praise her. She is self-opinionated enough already ; but she really is a dear clever thing, though she couldn’t read such books as you appear to revel in.”

“ Muriel was impertinent enough to look through your book-shelves.”

“ My old Oxford books ? They are nothing above the average undergrad. ; but I am fond of them.”

He was thinking of the long blank years when he was separated from those dear books, which an Oxford friend, who knew of his trouble, had garnered for him, together with other small treasures left in his rooms before the coming of disaster.

“ I feel sure you are writing a book,” said Muriel, with the romantic girl’s inspired look in her eyes, the look of the girl who can adore croquet, and yet feel that she could have died for Byron.

“ I have my dream of something more than a column in an evening paper ; but please don’t be too kind, and make me an egotist.”

“ But we want you to talk about yourself,” said Muriel, insistently. “ We have never seen an author. In a radius of twenty miles there is not a creature who could write one of those essays you talk of so scornfully. It is such a treat to meet

someone who cares for books—real books—not the last novel."

"My granddaughter is nothing if not enthusiastic," said Mrs. Warden, thinking that seventeen was going rather too far in worship of twenty-seven.

"Miss Hammond was good enough to say she would show me the grounds," said Desmond. "I knew the place ten years ago when Sir Harley Gowering lived here, but I want to see what changes you have made."

"You knew it in Sir Harley's time? Were you living in the neighbourhood?"

"My father's house was near Reading. But it was not as a neighbour that I knew Sir Harley. His great-nephew and I were chums at Eton, and I used to come here a good deal in the summer vacation."

"I hope you won't think we have uglified the place."

"That I am sure you could not do."

"Not of our own accord, perhaps. But who can measure what architects and builders can make one do when they bring their technical knowledge to bear upon one's ignorance?"

"Grannie has a strong will," said Muriel. "She fought architect and builder, and wouldn't have a brick or a stone altered."

"I wanted to restore, not to improve. I had to fight hard for my dairy."

"How was that?"

"The architect wanted to rebuild it in a totally different style—like Lady Somebody's dairy at Lord Somebody's place in the north. He swore that this was of the worst possible period—the dark ages of country-house building—after Nash and before Pugin. Pseudo-classic, First Empire, everything that is vicious. But I told him not to change a stone or an ornament; and I think," concluded

Mrs. Warden with a complacent smile, as she rose and led the way to the house, "that you will say it is a pretty dairy, and suggestive of Clarissa Harlowe."

"Poor dear Grannie! You know it was built ages after Richardson's day."

"I said suggestive, Muriel. That does not tie me to a date."

"There was an underground passage leading to the dairy," said Desmond.

"There *is* a passage, you mean. I use it frequently in wet weather."

The inspection of the dairy occupied them for some time, as there were many things to be seen that do not usually appertain to dairies—bits of old china, Wedgwood and Swansea, so-called Lowestoft, dessert dishes of cream-white Leeds, and old blue and pink Delft tiles that Mrs. Warden made the visitor admire, bright blue pictures of ships, and cavaliers on prancing horses, with quaint Dutch mottoes.

"These are my only improvements upon Lady Gowering's taste," she said, smiling at the blue-and-white wall, with patches of quaint old pink here and there, "and now come and see how tidy I have made that dismal passage."

She opened a white door, and switched on the electric light, revealing little rose-coloured lamps hanging from the roof all along the underground corridor.

She had indeed made the passage tidy. The floor was paved with sky-blue tiles, the walls were lined with rose-coloured bricks.

"Blue and pink are the colours I adored when I was a child," she said, "and I adore them still. Blue the colour of the sky and the sea; pink the colour of sunrise and sunset."

Desmond walked by her side slowly, deep in thought.

" You are measuring the passage," exclaimed Muriel, who had observed his even steps.

" I wanted to see how long it is."

" Don't trouble. It's just fifty-seven yards."

" These tiles are very neatly laid. I suppose you had some famous London firm for the job."

" No ! That would be quite out of my way. I like to be of some use to the place I live in. Skeddles, our local builder, did everything, under the direction of a Windsor architect. I couldn't get one nearer."

Desmond wondered whether one of Skeddles's men had unexpectedly come into a fortune, or whether several of them had become rich. It seemed incredible, almost impossible, that the stolen wealth could have escaped the picks and spades that levelled the ground on which he was walking. Only by a miracle of slovenly work, by " *ca canny* " at its worst, could the box have remained hidden.

Even while he praised the neatness of the work in order to lead up to his question, he had noted that the floor bulged in several places, and that tiles had been replaced here and there, while a good many others were broken, and he was inclined to think that Mrs. Warden had sacrificed something in her beneficent desire to benefit her neighbours. But as his knowledge of that lady's character developed, he came to understand how lightly such small sacrifices lay upon a benevolence that was almost infinite.

From the passage they entered the house, and here Desmond had to admire rooms of a delicious cheerfulness, where everything seemed designed for a joyous life—not one sombre note in the pictures on the walls or in the colouring of draperies and furniture. A piano, exquisitely painted, or in delicate marqueterie, in every sitting-room, roses and butterflies wandering over all the chintz covers, white enamelled wood-work, blue satin curtains in

the drawing-room, pink satin curtains in the music-room, rose colour predominant in the library, apple green in the billiard-room ; and from every window verdant lawns and blue river and the pink clouds in the evening sky echoed the gay colouring indoors.

It was nearly seven o'clock when Desmond left Lorriford, after having been invited to come back to dinner at eight. He refused the dinner invitation, on the ground of his evening work, but accepted for luncheon on the following Sunday.

He had no occasion to make a Sherlock Holmes investigation of Messrs. Skeddles's yard and staff, for in his excellent landlady he enjoyed the society of one to whom no detail of life in the village was unknown. He introduced the subject with a casual air while Mrs. Hawker was waiting upon him at his dinner, that lady being her own cook and parlour-maid, only aided by an unseen girl who was supposed to do all the rougher and dirtier work, but who, according to Mrs. Hawker, made more dirt than she cleaned.

“ If I don't want a black thumb printed on every plate I have to wipe them after her, and I don't know as it wouldn't be less trouble to do all the washing-up myself, and leave her nothing but the grates.”

This was sagely spoken, for in the grate season the girl was wont to so besmirch herself with black-lead and coal dust that she blackened every object she touched. Happily now there was only the kitchener ; and that was too capacious and difficult a machine for the girl to handle.

“ I wonder Mrs. Warden did not employ a London builder when she restored the old house,” Desmond said, in a lazy conversational voice, as Mrs. Hawker offered him the French beans.

“ So do I, sir, and so does my master. She had Skeddles ! Skeddles of all people ; which everybody knows that young Skeddles never was the man

his father was, and that he's getting worse every day."

"How do you mean?"

Mrs. Hawker lifted her elbow and touched her mouth with her hand, a gesture that gave the clue to young Skeddles's degeneracy.

"Awful," she said, "but I must say he carries it off like a gentleman, always dressed well, and drives a good horse in his dogcart, but if that horse isn't the death of him some evening when he's coming home from Windsor after dark I shall be very much astonished. And a pretty little wife, too, and three fine children. Well, we all know it's the ruin of the country," concluded Mrs. Hawker, with a sudden plunge from the particular to the general.

## CHAPTER VII.

AFTER the Sunday luncheon and an afternoon in the garden, and a walk to evening service in the lovely old church across the river, Desmond was established as *l'ami de la maison*. Mrs. Warden entertained a high idea of his intellectual powers, since a man who could write in the newspapers seemed to her high above the average thinker, and she soon found herself consulting him about all her business affairs, and even appealing to him in domestic difficulties. To him she referred such troublesome questions as the best way to get rid of a footman suspected of loose morals, or the right line to take with a coachman who gave himself airs and objected to any questioning of the corn bill.

This went on all through the summer, Desmond spending some part of almost every day at Lorriford. If he did not go there of his own accord, there came a little note from Mrs. Warden or a long letter from Muriel, urging him to look in at tea-time, for some particular reason. His visits were sometimes of the shortest, for he grudged the time taken from his books and his pen ; and charming as Muriel was in her girlish simplicity and with her girlish enthusiasms, she was not the magnet to draw him from the work he loved.

“Going already ! I think you like the dullest

book that ever was printed better than Grannie and me," she said, when he rose from the cosy tea-table in the bow-window.

"The books are my tools, the things by which I live," he said. "You and Mrs. Warden are the beauty of life. Utility has to come first."

"Yes, you can turn it off with a compliment; but I know you are frightfully bored here."

"My dear Muriel, you are much too exacting," said Mrs. Warden. "Mr. Desmond has been very kind to come this afternoon, for I know Friday is his busiest day, and now that he has told me what I ought to write to the corn-chandler about that atrocious account, we have no excuse for detaining him."

The girl distorted her countenance into what her grandmother called a "Muriel face," and walked to the piano, where she sat down and began to strum a Clémenti Sonatina, her last lesson from an expensive person who came down from London once a week, and sat by the piano, gazing dreamily at the blinking river till he was apt to blink himself, or was only just sufficiently awake to express the proper amount of horror when Muriel's delicate fingers produced hideous discords.

She went on playing till Desmond had gone; only nodding him good-bye across the piano, and then she got up quickly and ran to her grandmother.

"Grannie, this is really too absurd," she said.

"And what is the matter now, child? And how rude you were to Mr. Desmond."

"I couldn't help being provoked with him when he was so eager to run away, just as if we were two frights and dowdies. And you are looking magnificent in that new gown."

"Do you suppose he notices my gowns?"

"I know he doesn't notice mine. The more expensive they are the less he seems to see them. There must be miles of lace on this muslin frock,

and he looked at it no more than if it were made of Oxford shirting. But I know the reason."

"Indeed!"

"He is over-worked, horribly over-worked, for those wretched newspapers. Just to earn his scanty subsistence in Mrs. Hawker's lodgings—chops, chops, chops, for dinner, till he must loathe the idea of sheep—he has to toil night and day. He is pining to write a book—a book that would make England ring with his name; but he can't get on with it, because he has to write for those odious papers—for bread, mere bread!"

"But would not the book earn something?"

"Not just at first. Afterwards, when the ringing had begun, piles and piles of gold. But before the gold began to pour in he would have died of starvation, or laudanum, like that ill-used angel Chatterton."

"I think you are needlessly tragic. He likes his work, and he seems happy."

"He is simply killing himself, and we are always laying last straws upon his burden. I wonder you could go on so long without seeing what you ought to do."

"What I ought to do?"

"Yes, Grannie, you, you, you! It is you who are to blame if he drops dead over his desk. You are always asking his advice, and you always find him wise and able to cope with every difficulty; yet it has never occurred to you to ask him to be your secretary, with a salary that would enable him to snap his fingers at the newspapers and devote himself to his lovely book."

"What do you know of his book? Has he shown you the manuscript?"

"He would die first. But I know it is lovely. Thackeray said that Goldsmith had a lovely mind; and I know that Mr. Desmond's mind is lovely. It comes out in his conversation."

"I daresay he might be a very good secretary and business manager, if he cared to undertake such commonplace duties; but, really, Muriel, I don't know what my friends would think of my wisdom if I had a good-looking young man almost living in the house."

"I hope you don't think there'd be any danger of my falling in love with him," exclaimed Muriel, with ineffable scorn, as if only the basest order of girl ever fell in love.

"I don't know what to think."

"If you want to know the truth, *qua* man, I rather hate him; though I am intensely grateful to him for saving your life."

There was a brief silence; and then Mrs. Warden opened her mind to her granddaughter.

"To tell you the truth, my dear, I have often thought that he would make an admirable secretary, if I could persuade him to undertake the work; and if I could be sure that you wouldn't do anything foolish."

"Set my cap at him, do you mean? I hope you don't think I'm that sort of girl."

"Of course not! But you are rather too enthusiastic. You rave about him as a writer. You praise him too much."

"Can anyone help praising him after reading those adorable essays? He is almost as witty as Charles Lamb or Oliver Goldsmith. I'll forget that he has ever written a line rather than deprive you of his help as your secretary. But I daresay he'll refuse. I fancy he is rather a stuck-up pig, in spite of his pretty speeches."

Mrs. Warden chose her opportunity soon after this, and invited George Desmond to fill the position in which his predecessor at the Lock House had proved such a dismal failure.

"I thought I ought to engage an elderly man,"

she said, “a serious kind of person, but I see that elderly people don’t take kindly to new work. The poor dear man had taken a splendid degree in mathematics, but I don’t believe he was ever sure of himself in adding up my butcher’s book, and he was utterly without tact in writing to my solicitors.”

Mrs. Warden proposed a salary of three hundred a year, which was one-third more than she had given the elderly person ; and Desmond was to have his private sitting-room in her house, and she was to pay for his lodgings at the Lock. He thanked her for the compliment implied in the offer, and asked only twenty-four hours for consideration.

“ You would have plenty of time for your book after you had finished my dry-as-dust business,” she said.

There was the temptation. To have done with the hand-to-mouth scribbling, the writing about this and that, the humours of the hour, or the dreamer’s retrospective fancies, earning a guinea here and a couple of guineas there, just enough for the daily cost of life ; and never to be able to concentrate his force upon the book which was to him as a living creature, or rather an assemblage of living creatures, beings for whom their creator’s thought is the breath of life. They freeze to death under the hand of the haphazard scribbler, the man who cannot carry them about in his mind, in long hours of day-dreaming ; the common hack who only remembers that he has a story to tell when he seats himself at his desk.

He accepted Mrs. Warden’s offer. He knew that he could do all the work needed for her interests during the morning hours ; and that he could have the evening free for his book, that evening of his which sometimes stretched deep into the small hours of to-morrow morning.

Mrs. Warden showed herself greatly pleased by his acceptance ; and she was still better pleased

a week later when she saw how seriously he considered his duties, and with what gusto he took to business details that had bored her to death. From the hour when he seated himself, for the first time, at the writing-table in the comfortable room in the basement, once a smoking-room, he showed himself a man of business. That room was to be his own particular den, where no one had the right to intrude upon him, and he soon showed people that he did not desire any intrusion. Muriel found him adamant, when she essayed to temper his avocations with her girlish amusements. Nothing would induce him to mix play with work. No invitation to the river or the croquet lawn could lure him from his desk ; and the girl had to resign herself to the fact that though he spent all his mornings at Lorringford she had much less of his society than when he was an occasional visitor.

It had been supposed that he would always join Mrs. Warden and Muriel at luncheon ; but this privilege he declined. They lunched at half-past one, and they very often had company, girl friends of Muriel's, sometimes with boy brothers, the Vicar, or the Vicar's wife, or the croquet-playing curate. Half-past one was too early for the secretary to strike work, and the luncheon was apt to be a long business, with coffee and cigarettes in the garden. So at his own particular request the secretary's luncheon was brought to his room, and was usually a Spartan repast of sandwiches and soda-water.

Mrs. Warden submitted all her affairs to his judgment, from the dismissal of a servant to the investment of surplus income, and he gave conscientious thought and care to every detail.

He found that her investments since her husband's death were not of the wisest. She had gone freely into industrials. Her fancy had been caught by companies newly started, and sometimes rotten at the core. She had lost a good deal of money already,

and was likely to lose more unless she sold out of several hazardous enterprises.

He showed her the risks she ran, and advised her to sell at a sacrifice, before she was called upon for the balance of £5 shares, of which she had paid only £1, whereupon he discovered that the poor lady had paid her £1 in perfect unconsciousness that any farther claim could be made upon her.

“By all means, sell every one of the horrid things,” she exclaimed. “They all promised six per cent. with a prospect of ten within a few years; and I thought I was doing so well for those who are to come after me.”

“I think if you were to follow Mr. Warden’s example in your future investments you would do wisely.”

“Dear Matthew! He was so cautious after we settled in England. He said he had done with gambling when he left Griqualand.”

After attending to the lady’s investments, Desmond considered her widespread benefactions; and here he discovered much need of careful investigation. She had been giving away nearly half her income, and though much of her large means had gone to hospitals and the ultra-respectable forms of philanthropy, almost as much had been lavished on charlatans and impostors. He found that she had fallen a victim to almost every specious schemer made notorious by the fearless editor of *Truth*, and that she had responded with a cheque to every whining epistle from the professional begging-letter writer. She had indeed sore need of a secretary with brains and industry, to keep her impulsive beneficence in check, and to temper charity with worldly wisdom. Desmond possessed the faculty of order in a high degree, and the task of bringing clearness and method into the confusion of Mrs. Warden’s affairs was a labour of love. She had trusted him with a child-like simplicity, asking

no reference as to character or capacity, guided by sheer liking for the man himself, and confident in her own power to read the mind of any fellow-creature, and he gave her his unwearying service, resolved that she should have no reason to be sorry she had so trusted him.

“ You see how little reason you had to fear that Mr. Desmond and I would fall in love with each other,” Muriel remarked with some asperity, when Mrs. Warden was praising her secretary. “ We hardly ever meet, except on Sundays.”

The Sunday luncheon and the Sunday afternoon in the gardens or on the river were Desmond’s only holidays. Now that he had done with journalism he could give himself the Sabbath of rest. He went to the morning service at the old Norman church ; played croquet, or worked with sculls or punt pole in the afternoon ; strolled in the meadows with Mrs. Warden and Muriel after tea, admiring the Jersey herd, with every particular member whereof he was personally acquainted.

He knew that Starlight had an ugly knack of butting at a friend, in spite of the placid beauty of her stag’s eyes, and that Coral was no more trustworthy. He knew that neither Polly nor Tilburina had ever been known to do wrong, and would follow Muriel about like dogs, and with a dog-like affection. He knew also, in his business capacity, what an extravagant price Mrs. Warden had paid for all these creatures—from the prize pedigree heifer at seven hundred pounds to the lowlier members of the tribe at a hundred and fifty.

It was a placid kind of life. The people who came to Lorringford were the sons and daughters of the soil, whose ancestors had owned the land when this part of the country was still remote from London, only to be reached by coach or postchaise, on a road beset by perils of highwaymen and perils of flood or snowdrift. Mrs. Warden was unknown

to the smart people who came tearing from London on hooting motors, the aristocratic week-enders, lights of the Senate house, Bench and Bar, beauties and foplings. Of these Mrs. Warden knew very little, nor Muriel much, except that the hats on the Sunday river seemed to grow in beauty and wonder, while the manners took her breath away.

Next summer Muriel was to have a season in London, and then no doubt these hats and these manners would become familiar to her. A furnished house was to be found in Mayfair, and Muriel was to make her curtsey to her Queen in the prettiest frock that Dover Street could supply. In her present mood Muriel took no pleasure in a prospect that had once been dazzling. The meadows, the cows, the croquet lawn and the back-water were all she wanted. In a word Muriel was in love, with the foolish feverish seventeen-year-old love that can create an atmosphere of enchantment around even a commonplace young man. She was at the age when to fall in love is inevitable, and the lover an accident.

Desmond was not commonplace. He was handsome, and his features had "the pale cast of thought" which is a girl's ideal of beauty. He was writing a romance, and was therefore romantic. And perhaps his greatest attraction for Muriel was the fact that he held her at arm's-length. The power of the magnet is static. The flame does not go to the moth, but the moth to the flame. The deeper Desmond's mental isolation the more interesting Muriel thought him.

She was seldom alone with him ; and in their rare and brief duologues she had never induced him to talk of himself, neither of his past nor of his future.

She had her theories about him.

"I believe he must be engaged to some girl whose people won't allow him to marry her," she told her grandmother. "There must be something—some

secret sorrow—or he would not be so dreadfully reserved. He's not a bit like the common herd of young men. I wonder how my brother and he will get on."

"I don't think Randolph and he will get on at all," Mrs. Warden answered; "but as he is busy all day, and never dines with us, and Randolph will be out shooting, that won't matter."

"All I hope is Randolph won't put on side. Mr. Desmond wouldn't stand that."

"I don't think your brother will give himself airs when he knows how much I value Mr. Desmond's services."

Muriel was doubtful, knowing that her brother was inclined to be jealous of anybody who came too near his grandmother. With the coming of years of discretion he had discovered that his grandmother was his only revenue, and that his father and stepmother had done him a grievous wrong when they refused the Wardens' offer to adopt him.

Had his grandparents been allowed to take complete possession of him in those early days there could have been no question as to his future; but now everything was problematical. His grandmother adored Muriel, and might leave her the bulk of her fortune, cutting him off with some beggarly legacy, five or ten thousand, just enough for a year's extravagance and a life's regret.

On the other hand, it was possible that if he played his cards adroitly Mrs. Warden might make an equal division of her wealth, or even leave him more than his sister, with the condition that he should take her name. Hammond Warden wouldn't go badly on a visiting card, he thought. His grandmother had always been kind to him, and generous in her gifts; but she had never offered to take any of the expenses of his education off his father's hands. He was his father's boy, and his

father had to provide for him. Under that parental guidance his education had been a failure. He had learnt French from his stepmother's Swiss maid, and when he grew troublesome had been shipped off to a cheap preparatory school on Lake Leman. He had gone from Switzerland to Wellington, and had done badly in everything except football, which seemed to suit his vehement character. After Wellington he had been sent to a military coach at a watering-place on the South Coast, and had done worse than at Wellington, and having got himself into disgrace socially, nobody was surprised when he failed hopelessly in the Army exam., and had finally to give up soldiering as a bad job, or a job beyond his capacity to learn.

Now, between three and four-and-twenty, he was a loafer, with various inchoate plans for the disposal of his future. Whether that future was to be spent among the gold mines of the Rand, or in the Canadian lumber trade, or in an Indian tea-garden, or a cattle-ranche in Texas, he had not yet decided. Some grand adventurous line of business he meant to adopt ; and in the meantime he was spending all the money he could extract from grandmother, father, and stepmother, while he was making up his mind.

Early in October this precious youth appeared upon the scene, to shoot woods that had been newly stocked and properly cared for since Mrs. Warden bought the estate, but which had been the poacher's paradise in former years, sometimes let, but oftener unlet, and with only one keeper and odd man to look after them.

Mrs. Warden, Muriel and Desmond were at tea in the summerhouse, with two girl friends of Muriel's and the High Church croquet-playing curate, on Sunday afternoon, an October day so bland and sunny that it might have been August, when

Randolph arrived with guns and dogs. He had been expected on Saturday, but rarely came on the day for which he announced himself.

The guns were left in the hall, but the dogs followed him, a couple of brown Irish setters and a fine retriever, which unexpected guests began a raid on the tea-tables, and had to be whipped off and kicked away before Randolph could pay his respects to his grandmother.

“Take your dogs to the stables, and then come back to tea,” said Mrs. Warden; and as she was one of the few people whom Randolph obeyed, he ran off with the three scampering creatures, whose high spirits had filled the curate with horror, and the girls with apprehension for the fate of their Sunday frocks.

He was introduced to his grandmother’s visitors, and especially to Desmond, about whom his sister had written very often in her long gossipy letters; and after he had apologized for not arriving the day before, and had been gently reproved for travelling on Sunday, he settled himself in a chair next Muriel, who was attending to the teatray.

“No chance of a whisky-and-soda, I suppose?” he murmured, as he took his cup and saucer.

“Don’t ever imagine such a thing, if you don’t want to scare Grannie.”

“I can’t control my imagination. Tea’s washy stuff after a long dusty journey.”

“Where did you come from?”

“Liverpool. I’ve been making arrangements to play in one of their ‘footer’ matches.”

“I wonder you care to go about the country for that horrid game.”

“Girls are no judge of games. So that’s the secretary? Rather a good-looking chap, but uncommonly serious. Sanctimonious and a smug, I should say.”

“Nothing of the kind!”

“Oh, I know you’re in love with the fellow,” muttered Randolph, under cover of a lively discussion between the curate and the two girls, who were talking croquet.

“How dare you say such a thing?”

“What colour’s red? Don’t go and throw yourself away on an adventurer—especially if you are to be my grandma’s heiress.”

“I wonder why you always say such horrid things directly you come here,” said Muriel, rising suddenly and leaving the table. “You can pour out your second cup for yourself. Mr. Manvers”—to the curate—“I know you are dying for a double, Lucy and you against Flora and me.”

“There’s not much time before the evening service; but perhaps Desmond will take my place if I can’t finish the game.”

Desmond agreed without question, but did not go with Manvers and the ladies to the croquet lawn. He resumed his seat when they were gone, drew a little book from his breast pocket and began to read, while Randolph sat at the tea-table consuming sandwiches in a somewhat uncivil silence.

The silence of the other man was too much for his nerves after a time. He meant to be uncivil, but he didn’t want to be ignored. He scrutinized the face bent gravely over the little book—a volume of Horace, small enough for a waistcoat pocket. What an abstracted air the fellow put on as he read, seemingly unconscious of the other’s vicinity. He was certainly good-looking—features clean cut, complexion pale but not effeminate, eyes dark grey—eyes that had seen trouble. The short, square beard made the face look older than its actual years. Randolph thought the secretary must be at least five-and-thirty.

“You don’t seem over keen on croquet,” he said at last, taking out a cigar-case and preparing for a smoke.

"I am not a fanatic, like Manvers; but I am ready if I am wanted."

"Is the parson chap a dab at the game?"

"It is there he shines. If his theology was up to his four-ball break he would be on the high road to a bishopric."

"Stupid, creepy game! I can't understand anybody caring about it."

"You like billiards, I suppose."

"Oh, yes! that's good enough."

"Then croquet—for a good player—is only billiards on the grass. It requires as much head, and as delicate a hand."

"Have a cigar? Camaradas Buenas—the real thing."

"No, thank you. I smoke a pipe—and not till the evening."

Desmond rose and walked towards the lawn, where Mrs. Warden was seated watching the curate's anxious performance with the four balls. She watched the game almost daily, and with unfailing interest, and she knew very little more about it than when she began to watch. Long shots won her admiration, because she knew what they meant, and skill in these was obvious, and towards the end of a well-fought game she would become breathless with excitement, and feel as intense as if she had been watching the fight for the blue ribbon of the turf, in those thrilling moments after the horses have rounded Tattenham Corner.

Manvers had put down his mallet while he was still master of the balls, the first note of church bells sounding across the water.

"You'll find Peacock there with the boat," Mrs. Warden told him, as he made a hurried adieu, while Desmond took up his mallet and went on with the break.

Randolph watched him intently, wanting to know if he were the kind of man who does everything well.

He was evidently able to hold his own at croquet, for he manœuvred the four balls triumphantly about the ground, and finished the break to the complete satisfaction of his partner. As soon as the game was over, he took leave, or would have done so if Muriel and her girl friends had not insisted on walking to the Lock House with him.

“Won’t you come, Rannie? I’m sure you must want a walk,” Muriel said.

“Not much. I hope to get my fill of ekker tomorrow.”

Having made this brotherly answer, Randolph turned his back upon the company and strolled off to the house.

“How handsome your brother is,” said Violet Deacon, as she put her arm through Muriel’s.

“And how clever and distinguished-looking,” said Lilian, on the other side of her friend, while Mrs. Warden and Desmond walked on in front of them.

They would have liked to ask if he was engaged, the world being peopled with that pernicious impostor—a good-looking, agreeable young man, always ready for a trivial flirtation, whose troth has been given to his vicar’s daughter.

## CHAPTER VIII.

OCTOBER was ended, and in the woods the sombre autumnal green began to brighten into russet and amber. Here and there among the birches were trees of gold, and in the meadows the hawthorns looked like trees of fire. Randolph had shot plenty of pheasants, and had been allowed to do what he liked with his bag. He generally drove to the station with his birds, carrying a sheaf of ready-addressed labels in a capacious pocket of his shooting-coat, and his grandmother would have wondered not a little had she seen some of the addresses—the Miss Kittys and the Miss Tottys,—in streets about Leicester Square, streets she had never heard of. Some of the birds he sent to his own people, and as only the keeper knew how many he shot on the days he went out by himself, no remark was made upon his disposal of his bag.

Twice during the month Mrs. Warden invited some of her neighbours to join her grandson for a day's shoot, and on these occasions she gave them a breakfast, to which sisters and aunts and cousins were bidden, and which was a lively meal; and sometimes Muriel and her friends met the shooters at a picnic luncheon of steaming hot food, Irish stews and meat puddings, carried in Norwegian cans, upon which the hungry youths fell like young vultures upon carrion.

It was a pleasant existence, but an idle one; and Mrs. Warden—who remembered her husband's

strenuous life, his zeal, his energy, his patience and courage under difficulties, took a serious view of youth's obligations, and above all expected youth to be bursting with ambition, ready to take fire at a spark—would sometimes try to apply the spark to Randolph.

“ My dear boy, do you ever think of your future ? ” she asked.

“ Do I ever think of anything else ? ” he retorted with an aggrieved air. “ Of course I think of my future, and I know pretty well what it is to be, roughing it in some unhealthy climate. All the decent places are overcrowded. I suppose it will be cattle-farming in Texas. You know what some chap said about Texas ? ”

“ Indeed I do not.”

“ He said if he had an estate in Texas and another in Hell, he'd let Texas.”

“ Then I don't see any reason for your choosing such a place.”

“ Oh, but a fellow like me—without capital—can't pick and choose. He must pitch his tent anywhere he can earn his daily bread—British Guiana—the Guinea Coast—any pestilential hole that the lucky people won't look at.”

“ I don't think you need choose a pestilential place ; but I'll be frank with you, Randolph, and tell you at once that I'm not going to find capital to start you anywhere on the high horse ; certainly not till I have seen that you can do something for yourself—off your own bat, as you call it. You see, you have done rather badly so far ; and you've got to redeem your character ! ”

“ It was my father's fault I didn't pass my exam. He wanted to get me into the army on the cheap—put me with a duffing beast of a crammer, in a hole of a watering-place, and expected me to go over the heads of chaps who had been with the best men in London.”

“ That was five years ago. What have you been doing since then ? ”

“ Oh, well, I’ve been knocking about a bit, and trying to see my way to getting on in the world. Of course I know I’ve got to do it off my own bat. My father spends every penny he can scrape on himself and his precious wife. He thinks he does a good deal for me when he gives me the run of my teeth, and a few pounds for my tailor. I’ve been kept pretty short, I can tell you, Grannie. If it wasn’t for your handsome tips I might be in rags.”

“ Well, you must make up your mind about your career. You can’t be quite without ambition. I shall help you—but not with capital. You’ll have to help yourself, and put your shoulder to the wheel as your grandfather did forty years ago. I’ve plenty of friends in South Africa ; and that’s going to be one of the greatest countries of the future—whatever people may think about it now. I can send you on to a tobacco plantation in Rhodesia, and if you do well for a few years as a salaried clerk I may buy you a partnership. There will be fortunes made in Rhodesian tobacco before you are many years older.”

“ That sounds jolly,” said Randolph. “ Bread and cheese and life-long exile ! ”

“ Bread and cheese for the first few years, and a fortune afterwards. A magnificent climate—a free life—under a blue sky. I can’t fancy anything better for a young man, sound in wind and limb as you are.”

“ Oh, I’m sound enough,” Randolph said, rather discontentedly.

The Rhodesian tobacco fields had no attraction for a youth whose heart was in Leicester Square.

His only idea of a pleasant life was a London life. Most of his vacations had been spent in London. He had steeped his senses in metropolitan delights. The streets, the music-halls, the more frivolous

theatres, were his element. There lay his supreme idea of bliss. To have unlimited cash, and the *entrée* of the stage door ! From his earliest childhood all his treats had been London treats. His father had taken him to theatres and music-halls from the time he was six years old. If it had not been for Christmas holidays and rabbit-shooting at Framer he would have grown up an absolute Cockney. Later, when he had done with Wellington and failed for Sandhurst, he had spent the October month at Framer, had ridden to hounds and had made himself a good shot. But the idea of an adventurous life in a half-civilized country had no charms for him. He had talked very big, as it was his nature to do, about sheep-farming in Queensland or a cattle ranch in the far West ; but this big talk had just served to postpone the question of how he was to earn his living ; and in the meantime he had been spending his grandmother's tips, and getting into debt, in the haunts he loved, and where he believed himself a personage, and highly esteemed for his cleverness, genial manners and good looks.

Of late he had found difficulties. Generous as Mrs. Warden's gifts had been they had not covered the expenses of a young man about town, the worst part of town being understood. The ready money had run through his fingers like water, and had only helped him to get into debt by a semblance of good means. He had got a little money from the Jews—not much, since his future, even as the rich Mrs. Warden's grandson, was problematical, but enough to make a scourge for his back. Altogether his financial affairs were uncomfortable, and he was in a position which he himself described as a tight place.

He had sounded his grandmother, hoping that she would loosen the bonds, and set him free ; but as he was afraid to tell her that he was in debt, after her handsome cheques at short intervals,

he saw himself face to face with bankruptcy, and a certain amount of disgrace, some of his debts being of a discreditable kind.

Mrs. Warden saw the gloom on his countenance as he sat by the fire in her morning-room, where she had invited him to a friendly talk, and her heart yearned to him. After all, he was her daughter's son, the child of her only child; and the memory of that daughter, so fondly loved and so early lost, was sweet to her. It was a pity that he closely resembled his father in features and in manner, except that his manner was worse than that of the man who had spent his young years in a crack regiment, and who had only degenerated after he had left the army. If she could have seen any look of his mother's fair young face, any transient expression, or could have heard any tone of voice that recalled her girl, her heart would have gone out to him. She had to remind herself that he was Isabel's son, and that it was her duty to help him.

"I want you to play a manly, independent part, Rannie," she said, with grave kindness. "I want you to chalk out your own path in life and stick to the straight line—above all, I don't want you to loaf about London waiting for dead men's shoes."

"Grandmother, I hope you don't think——"

"I don't think any evil of you; but I know what the world is, and how people will talk to a young man who is supposed to have expectations."

"I have never had expectations," Randolph answered almost fiercely. "My stepmother took care to prevent that. If she had not interfered I might have been as much your son as Muriel is your daughter—instead of always ranking as an outsider."

"That's a very unjust remark, Randolph. Pray when have I ever treated you as an outsider?"

"Oh, I know you're generous, and that kind of

thing, and you've let me have a good time with the shooting. But I know you don't care two-pence for me, while you make an absolute fool of Muriel. The very sound of your voice is different when you speak to her."

"I am very fond of Muriel. She has been my constant companion since she was little more than a baby. She took your mother's place in my heart, and she will always be first. But I shall not punish you for your stepmother's refusal, which after all showed she was fond of you, so you ought not to be hard upon her."

"Oh, well, you see, I know what her fondness was worth. She has a Persian cat that she's fonder of now than she ever was of me."

"I'll be frank with you, Rannie," Mrs. Warden went on, in the same serious tone. "Affection is a thing that cannot be meted out in exact measure between two people; but I can never forget that you are my daughter's son—the son she passionately loved when she had been disappointed in the husband who ought to have been all the world to her. In material things I have dealt with you as with Muriel. You will both be rich by and by. You will share and share alike. I made my will soon after your grandfather's death, and nothing but bad conduct on your part or Muriel's would induce me to alter it. So all you have to do is to live an industrious, manly life, as your grandfather did, and to come out of it a splendid specimen of manhood like him."

Randolph's heart was beating furiously, and he had scarcely breath to murmur broken words of gratitude. This was his first assurance that he was secure of an equal share in his grandmother's fortune. He had always feared that she would heap all her riches upon Muriel's foolish head, make a great heiress of the girl in her overwhelming love; and to know that he was sure of half that

splendid fortune thrilled him with delight. A dazzling prospect of the idler's paradise shone before him. To be able to do what he liked, go where he liked, consort with the people he liked, and to have money enough to satisfy every desire—to be a king among the wild crew he loved ! The vision of that life of pleasure, as it can be lived only by the rich, intoxicated him. He could hardly speak the grateful acknowledgment that seemed indispensable.

" You will be as well off as your sister," Mrs. Warden continued quietly, watching the young man's countenance with grave scrutiny, " but you will have to wait. I was sixty-one on my last birthday ; but women live long nowadays, especially if they happen to have good means, active habits, and a cheerful mind."

He assured her that he hoped he should have to wait till he was on the verge of eternity rather than she should be stinted of time by so much as an hour.

" It is delightful to see you looking younger every year," he said.

" Well, my dear boy, while people are happy they can keep old Father Time at arm's-length. Lorringford suits me. Framer was full of sad memories, the ghosts of dead years. I don't want to forget your grandfather ; I want to keep my memory of him green ; but at Framer I thought of him all day long and that was bad for me."

Sixty-one ! Women live long nowadays. Randolph brooded over his grandmother's speech as he tramped the woods with his gun. They live long, cursedly long. Women in workhouses ; women in East-End garrets ; women whose life is semi-starvation, live till ninety, sometimes, proud of their years when they have nothing else to be proud of. Crones in almshouses, scantily fed, thinly clothed, with such small supply of fuel as will suffice to keep them from shivering, will live to a hundred.

Sixty-one ! Seventy-one, eighty-one ! Eighty-one is talked of lightly nowadays as not *very* old. A sheltered life, cherished and indulged, might go on to ninety, and beyond ninety. In plain words Randolph might have to wait thirty years for his fortune.

“ My God ! Why, I shall be an old man—a worn-out old man when my good luck begins. I shall have lost all capacity for any pleasure, except a good dinner and a rubber at my club. I shall be a miserable old fogey.”

And then he told himself that the promise of wealth at such a distance was of no use to him ; he needed money now, just to pay those pressing debts of his, just to set him on his legs, and make things pleasant for him with a woman whose favours were the breath of his life. How gladly he would have bartered those distant hopes for ten thousand down. But his expectations from his grandmother were worth nothing in the money market. Nothing he had told the Jews about her wealth and his probable succession had produced the slightest effect. Those gentry deal only in certainties.

From twenty to thirty years ! And in all that intolerable length of time his future would be at his grandmother’s mercy. If he failed to satisfy her ideas of manly virtue, if he got himself into a scrape of any kind, she might make a new will and leave him a beggar. He knew that her affections were centred in Muriel, that in dividing her fortune she was influenced by a sense of duty. He had none of the hold upon her that a dearly-loved son—let him behave never so badly—has upon his parents. She would strike him out of her will without a pang.

And her idea of manhood was one he could hardly hope to realize. Her old-fashioned idea of youth was that however rich a young man’s relations might be, he must strike out his own career,

and work like a galley-slave in all the best years of his life, and struggle on to success through a martyrdom of hard work and hard living.

He saw before him at least fifteen years of hardship. Say that his grandmother were not over greedy at the banquet of life, did not sit there till the last crumb was eaten, and the last lamp burnt out ; say that she made a respectable end at seventy-six years of age, even in that case there were fifteen years to be lived through, fifteen lean years, at the end of which he would be forty. And a man of forty seemed to him a veteran, past all the delight of life.

But he could not count on her death at seventy-six. It was her boast that she had never had a week's illness. She was just the kind of woman to live to a hundred.

Black care went with him and made him miss his birds all through that day. It was one of his solitary days—only himself and a keeper, and his three dogs. He was glad he had no companion with whom he must have exchanged friendly speech, and who must have seen how black his thoughts were. As the day wore on towards evening they were very black—black as the pit of hell.

## CHAPTER IX.

DESMOND had occupied his post of secretary and steward for a quarter of a year before he made any attempt to find out what had become of the hidden deed-box. He waited till he was thoroughly established as a person of authority in the household before he took action. Then, having provided himself with the proper tools, he went to work early one morning, and broke up the tile pathway over the place where he had buried the box. He had been exact in his measurements, and he knew the spot to within a few inches. He did not go to work secretly. For some days previously he had affected to discover foul odours in the passage, and had insisted that there was an escape of sewage gas from some forgotten brick drain. He talked about this so persistently that by subtle suggestion he hypnotized the two dairy-maids into a belief in this evil effluvium, and made them afraid the foul odour might travel as far as their sacred milk-pans, and taint their butter.

The tiles, having been badly laid on an unlevel surface, were broken in some places and loose in others, so that Desmond had no occasion to work long before he had cleared the area in which the deed-box ought to have been found. But no deed-box was there—he found only the indication of where it had been, the edges of a parallelogram of hard mortar in which the box had been embedded.

Whoever the thief was he had been too careless, or too hurried, to remove this evidence of his theft.

"Now for Skeddles," said Desmond, as he picked up his tools and went back to the house.

The first letter he wrote was to that respectable tradesman telling him to come to Lorrington early in the afternoon to attend to something of importance.

Desmond was eating his frugal luncheon when the builder was announced. "All right!" he said, and went at once to the hall, where he found Mr. Skeddles chewing a straw and dressed in the height of the horsey man's fashion, tightly trousered, Tattersall waistcoated, neatly whiskered, but with a weak mouth and a watery eye.

"Oh, there you are, Skeddles!" Desmond said cheerfully. "Come along, this way, please."

He crossed the hall, and took Skeddles through the kitchen, at the entrance to which that respectable tradesman behaved like a nervous horse.

"Is it anything wrong with the range?" he asked, glancing at the great kitchener, whence came a fierceness of red coal that almost suggested the arsenal at Woolwich.

"No, no. Come this way."

Skeddles shied more than once before Desmond got him into the subterranean passage.

"What's wrong here?" he asked, as he followed Mrs. Warden's secretary down the steps, stumbling a little on the way.

"There's something very much wrong, I believe."

Skeddles suddenly became incapable of speech, and gasped like a fish. He was always pale. Alcohol in his case was not a fire that reddened, but a slow, sullen heat that blanched. But there was an obvious

change in his complexion at this moment, a greyness in the pallor.

He followed Desmond to the spot where the scattered tiles and heaps of loose earth showed what had been done.

"There seems to have been a box buried here," Desmond said carelessly. "Do you know what became of it?"

"No box here when those tiles were laid. There was nothing here," gasped Skeddles.

"Ah, but are you sure? Were you here when your men were laying the tiles?"

"Yes, I was here, off and on, backwards and forwards."

"But you weren't here all the time?"

"No, of course not. The foreman was here. There was no need of me watching every inch of floor that was laid. My men are good workmen."

"But are they honest men?"

"I shouldn't employ them if they weren't. I work for all the best people about here. They've got to go into houses where there's thousands of pounds' worth of property lying about. They have to be honest."

"Well, you see that mortar bedded in the earth. You can see the shape of an oblong box, about a foot and a half long."

"It looks as if there might have been something there, but as likely to have been a stone as a box. Someone might have put a stone in to mend the level; this passage was all manner of levels when we set to work on it."

Skeddles knelt down—not the easiest attitude in trousers of sporting cut—and peered curiously at the mortar, and picked off a morsel here and there from the crumbled edges, and examined it minutely, as if it might contain traces of gold.

"I don't see any reason to suppose there was ever a box," he said. "A rough stone, or a bit of

plank, would have made just this kind of impression on the mortar."

"But why mortar, why so much trouble to embed a stone or a bit of wood?" asked Desmond, with the calm deliberation of a man who considers an abstract question, interested in it from a scientific point of view.

"Don't know," said Skeddles, struggling to his feet. "May I ask why you had these tiles taken up?"

"Ah, now we're coming to business," said Desmond cheerily, and then he went on to relate how he had discovered mephitic odours in the passage, and had suspected some old brick drain, broken and long forgotten, below the flooring. "I took those tiles up myself," he concluded, "but I didn't get deep enough."

Mr. Skeddles assured him that there was no drain. He had known Lorringford since he was a child, running about after his father. He had a plan of the old drains, made nearly a hundred years ago. But of course, if Mr. Desmond would like to have the passage floor taken up and relaid, he, Skeddles, was not going to refuse a job, and he would set his men to work early next week.

A builder never can begin any job—even were the peril of death from drain-poisoning in question—within the current week.

"They can dig as deep as you like," he said. "And you can convince yourself there ain't no drains."

Skeddles had been educated at a boarding-school for gentlemen's sons near Reading; but a certain slackness in grammar sometimes diversified his speech. He was not a bookish man, and had acquired rather less learning than the average schoolboy from his four years of tuition, paid for handsomely, with no curtailment of extras, by a proud father.

"The floor was so badly laid, that I think Mrs. Warden will approve of its being done better," Desmond said, "and be sure you make a good job of it this time."

"I'll see to it myself, sir," replied Skeddles, as if that were an assurance of a superlative result.

The work began a week later—not at the beginning of the week, for the more prosperous and respected the builder, the more he may be relied upon not to keep his word.

After that first interview with Skeddles no shadow of doubt was left in Desmond's mind as to the fate of the plunder that he wanted to return to the bank whence it had come. It mattered to him nothing that the bank people would think no better of the anonymous person from whom they should one morning receive value for the fourth part of the sum they had lost by their too easy acceptance of bills to an amount that should have provoked a closer scrutiny. The bank people would think no better of the unknown. They would take the conscience-money, and ascribe its restoration to fear rather than to honesty.

Happily it was for his own sake Desmond wanted to restore the ill-gotten pelf, to be rid for ever of the filthy lucre that had brought his father to so pitiful an end, and had stamped his own young life with the felon's brand. Go where he might, succeed as he might, at the top of his fortune he must still remain the escaped convict, the fugitive from Dartmoor.

Never would he forget those years on the moor, or the manner of their ending. Never would he forget the hand that had helped him, the warm-hearted girl whose romantic ardour had made escape possible. Without her help, creeping about the moor in his gaol clothes, hiding here, hiding there, starved, footsore, a hideous scarecrow that betrayed its quality to every eye, he must inevitably

have been recaptured and taken back to his doom, all that he had won of grace forfeited for ever by that impotent attempt.

A girl, a young girl, had come between him and that black and bitter fate. He was never tired of thinking of her, never tired of recalling the bright young face seen in the half darkness of night, and in the cold light of morning.

Grey eyes shining with intelligence and goodness, features delicately cut, but with a certain individuality that was not classic; dark hair of rich abundance, a long throat, a figure above the common height of women, a superb carriage, Atalanta's freedom of movement and length of step, arms long and slender, dazzling in the uncertain light. Every line of face and form had stamped itself upon his memory. Even the simple evening dress from which her shawl had fallen while she was helping him, the black gown and white lace pelerine, had remained with him like the memory of a picture that a student has copied with loving care.

He had never forgotten her. He never would forget her. She lived and moved in the book that he was writing, the romance into which he poured all that was romantic and sensitive in his own nature. It was curious to go from Mrs. Warden's house accounts and business letters to the dream-life of his novel, the life which was to him more real than the substantial things among which he lived.

At night, when his lamp burnt bright and clear, and the sound of the weir came through his open casement with a soothing monotony, George Desmond existed only as the shadow in the midst of those creatures of light. *She* was there, the chief figure in those dream-pictures, but not as he had seen her in the Vicarage yard. She moved in larger surroundings, a being of beneficent power, amidst the lurid horrors of the French Revolution. Grander

than Charlotte Corday, more exalted than Madame Roland, lovelier, because of higher intellect, than the Récamier.

She passed unscathed through those scenes of carnage, to warn and to save. It was a fairy-tale of woman's power over man's ferocity, a fairy-tale of an eighteenth century Una consorting with wild beasts and subjugating them. It was a foolish fable perhaps ; but he brought to it so ardent a fancy, so warm a fire of romantic love, that the invented creatures seemed flesh and blood, historical personages in a familiar history.

A grim humour relieved the poetry of the book. In those long days and evenings in the Museum reading-room he had steeped himself in the history of that evil time. He had lived through the Red Terror and the White Terror ; he had breathed the atmosphere of blood and flame, had seen the narrow streets, the open gutters, the squalid labyrinthine alleys of Old Paris, worse than even the wynds of Old Edinburgh. He had seen the gutters running blood, had tasted the nauseous taint of blood in the air. He had acquainted himself with every actor in that gory carnival—the fanatics, the mercenaries, the sensualists, the braggarts and charlatans, the gruesome, the serio-comic, the creatures engendered of revolution, murderers by instinct, but who might have gone down to the grave law-abiding citizens, mean hounds, but blood-guiltless, in an era of order and peace. He knew them all—their ferocious comedy, their tragedy of blood and tears, the horrible things they had said, the hellish things they had done. He had not taken his picture of the time from one book or from twenty ; but from every book and every document, map or engraving, that he could discover in the vast library. He had saturated himself in the spirit of the time, till his slumbers were made feverish by the fiends of the Mountain, the victims of the Gironde.

Young, and with vivid imagination, a man's first novel will be a thing of violent contrasts. Had he been twenty years older, experienced in the novelist's craft, Desmond might have set his ideal woman against a very different background. He might have surrounded her with all that is most beautiful, placid and artistic in the world of to-day, a lovely woman in a lovely drawing-room, where all the talk would be of Shakespeare and the musical glasses, or of their modern equivalents. But in that case his novel would have been a purely artificial product, bristling with paradox and epigram, full of fine writing, a book to catch the superlative critic and puzzle the novel-reading public. It is not that kind of book that youth writes in the full force and freshness of its power, and the story that Desmond was writing was on a higher plane, and embraced a wider world.

Nothing could have been happier than the circumstances under which he was now living. He had an income of which the third part sufficed for all his needs, and, while giving an honest day's labour for his wages, he had ample leisure for his own work. One care only troubled him, and that was the knowledge that Skeddles was in possession of the money which ought to have gone back to the bank, and that he was powerless to reclaim it, since he dared not advance a step in the matter, lest he should reveal his identity with the missing man from Dartmoor.

From time to time after his flight there had appeared a sensational paragraph in a morning paper showing that the convict's escape had not been forgotten by the police or the public—so rare was a successful evasion of that gloomy fortress. To attack Skeddles upon the question of the stolen box would be to declare himself the man who had hidden it; and then what ugly turn of fortune's wheel might he not expect?

What claim could he advance upon property found on premises that belonged to Sir Harley Gowering's daughter? It was agonizing to know that Skeddles was squandering the ill-gotten wealth; but he had no shadow of doubt as to the fact. The man's face and manner when he was taken to the spot where the treasure had been found had been a confession of guilt. The furtive, frightened glances, the difficulty of speech, had declared the thief.

He could do nothing, make no accusation, effect no compromise; but he could watch Skeddles, and so far as his brief leisure allowed, he became a Sherlock Holmes in his study of the boozing builder. Boozed! That was Mrs. Hawker's word—never quite drunk, and never quite sober; in that middle state which did not disable him from handling the reins, but which made him a reckless driver; which did not take away the faculty of speech, but which made him a rambling talker.

Two facts Desmond remarked in the history of Skeddles soon after the affair of the subterranean passage; the first, that he came to supervise the work wearing a black pearl tie-pin of great price; the second, that he had taken to driving tandem, and that his leader was a horse of superlative shape and style, such as is rarely driven by a village tradesman.

Further, Desmond had remarked the splendid appearance of Mrs. Skeddles at Lorriford Church, an appearance which had drawn mocking comments from Muriel.

“ Skeddles must be an out-and-out cheat, Grannie,” she said, “ or he couldn't afford Paris gowns for that pretty little wife of his. I'll swear that gown she had on this morning came from Paris.”

“ Nonsense, my dear—Reading. Can you suppose Mrs. Skeddles would go farther than Reading?”

“ Well then, from Paris *via* Reading. I daresay

it was a model gown, and she may have got it half price. But her diamond brooch ! Did you see that ? ”

“ I go to church to say my prayers, Muriel.”

“ So do I, but I can’t help having eyes, and being conscious of Mrs. Skeddles.”

Mrs. Hawker at the Lock House had not failed to observe Mrs. Skeddles’s fashionable gown, though she had not ascribed it to a Parisian source.

“ How that little woman has come out, sir,” she remarked, attending Desmond at his Sunday evening meal. “ You’ll find that a pretty little shoulder of lamb, sir, and I’ve done the baked potatoes a new way which I had from the cook at the great house. Mr. and Mrs. Skeddles do make the money fly. And him with his tandem ! I never see anything like it.”

“ I suppose he was always extravagant ? ”

“ No, sir, always dressy, and liking to drive a good horse ; but it’s only lately he’s broke out with jewellery and two horses, and up and down the river with a pack of friends to dinner every Sunday at the best hotels. Poor Mrs. Skeddles ain’t in that, and I do hear she frets herself to death about his driving home when he ain’t in a fit state to handle a horse.”

“ Skeddles must have had money left him ! ”

“ That he have not, sir. We couldn’t fail to have heard of it if he had. It would have been in the Reading papers.”

“ A small legacy, perhaps, four or five hundred pounds ; something that the papers wouldn’t notice ! ”

“ They notice everything, sir, when it’s local. Local news is that precious, because there’s so little of it.”

There could be no doubt that Skeddles was melting the securities. He would go to work, cautiously perhaps at first, Desmond thought, help

himself to a few hundreds for what our forefathers called "spending money." He would indulge himself with the things he liked, horses and champagne and dinners, and fine clothes for his wife. Then by and by he would become bolder, and perhaps would speculate and make away with the rest of the money. Speculation with a man of his mental calibre would be inevitable loss. He would be the prey of sharpers, tempted by the promise of cent. per cent. and allured by the flashy prospectuses of rotten companies.

It was maddening to think of the money dribbling away through those thievish hands, and to have no power to stop the waste.

## CHAPTER X.

IN every life, even in the most humdrum, there are surprises. And for George Desmond the first Monday in November brought a surprise that was sweeter and more thrilling than anything that had happened to him since his escape from prison.

Certain benevolent people in Windsor and the neighbourhood, desiring to raise a fund for a local charity, and to make a stir in their own particular world, had given themselves infinite trouble in the preparation of a stage play, which was to be enacted by amateurs on the actual stage of the actual theatre, and which, except in the fact of the superiority of the acting and personal appearance of the actors, was to be in every respect exactly like a professional performance.

The play finally selected was *Romeo and Juliet*, and the bread-and-butter miss who was to make her first appearance on any stage in the somewhat unthankful part of Juliet's mother happened to be one of Muriel's dearest friends. Muriel herself had been invited to take part in the performance, but as the only character the stage-manager could offer her was Rosaline, whose mute appearance as a guest at Lady Capulet's ball did not appeal to her, she had declined the honour.

She had indeed gone so far as to tell the gallant major of dragoons who helped in the stage management, that she considered the offer an insult, and he had vainly striven to convince her that a great

deal might be done with dumb show, and that to look exquisitely beautiful in the blaze of the magnesium light ought to satisfy any reasonable girl's ambition.

"Then, perhaps, I am not a reasonable girl, Major Huntley, for if ever I go on the stage I mean to act," snapped Muriel.

On the major sinking into the lowest depth of melancholy, she told him that she would make her Grannie take the most expensive box in the theatre, and that she and her friends would come to see the play.

The major immediately proposed to throw two boxes into one ; and was gratified by Mrs. Warden's cheque for five and twenty pounds.

To this performance on a mild November evening the Lorriford party were conveyed in a comfortable motor landau, hired for the occasion, Muriel brilliant in a new white frock, with a corsage that seemed to be made of rosebuds ; Mrs. Warden in her best velvet gown and most genial humour ; Randolph obviously bored ; and Desmond thoughtful and silent, having reluctantly consented to this appearance in a public assembly, forced to compliance by Muriel's persistency.

"Of course the sweet old play will be murdered," she said ; "but the more dire the slaughter the more fun. Imagine an amateur Romeo, a part that needs inspiration. I have seen him ! He is in the Dragoon Guards, with hair like spun sugar and a sloping chin. I believe he relies entirely on his fencing and his costume."

"And the Juliet ? Does her chin slope ? "

"The Juliet is lovely—a grand, tall creature with grey eyes like wells of light. She and I are going to be tremendous friends. She knows nothing of the river, can't scull a stroke. I am going to coach her."

"Then, I conclude, she is a newcomer, not an old inhabitant."

"Her father came into his property only last year. He succeeded his cousin, an old, old baronet, the eleventh, I believe, but they don't put on side!"

This was all that Desmond knew about the Juliet, till he stood at the back of Mrs. Warden's box looking at her in the scene with the Nurse at the end of the first act.

The motor had behaved badly about half way between Lorringford and Windsor and they had arrived half an hour late. The auditorium was dark, and in the brilliant stage light Desmond saw the face that he had looked at in the chill dank morning, the face of the girl who ran away from him when his gratitude became too ardent.

"If he be Married, my grave is like to be my wedding-bed!"

She spoke the words with a serious simplicity, with the convincing accent of truth. She had the look of one who sees herself face to face with Fate, and who accepts all that Fate can bring; the lover she loves, or death without him.

He did not know how she might appear to the rest of the audience, but to his eyes she was in face and form the quintessence of perfect womanhood. The tall figure with its long lines, slender but exquisitely moulded, a model for a sculptor who looked for poetry in form, the oval face and low broad brow, and strongly marked eyebrows and dark lashes, the dark hair, bound with a silver fillet, the long white satin gown, almost severe in its simplicity—all seemed the embodiment of a lovely dream.

The play went on, and he sat in a silent ecstasy, keeping himself in the darkest corner of the box. People came in and out between the acts, girl friends, young men, old men, the fine flower of more than one cavalry regiment. There was first a fuss about tea, and afterwards a fuss about ices. Mrs.

Warden's box was crowded, and all was confusion while the curtain was down. Everybody asked Muriel and her aunt the same questions. What did they think of the acting? Didn't they think it pretty good on the whole? Sir Harry as Romeo wasn't half so bad as people had expected.

The performance throughout had been respectable and painstaking, and Shakespeare's words had been spoken.

Some murder had been done no doubt, over and above the slaughter of Mercutio and Tybalt; but the old-fashioned amateur play which made for mirth from start to finish is as extinct as the dodo. Amateurs take themselves with an amazing seriousness, and achieve at least a middle-state that can be very dull, but is never outrageous enough to create an atmosphere of irrepressible mirth.

Mrs. Warden remembered, and almost regretted, some of the performances of her youth, in the back drawing-rooms of Tyburnia or Kensington. This severely correct rendering of a fine play bored her, though she admitted that the girl who played Juliet had a touch of the divine fire.

"I believe she thinks she is Juliet," she said after the potion scene, when Vera fell at the foot of the bed in a burst of hysterical sobbing.

She looked at her programme.

"Juliet—Miss Vera Penroyal. That must be the girl you met at Mrs. Tranmore's and raved about," she said to Muriel.

"I don't know what you mean by raving. She's a most delightful girl—so frank and unconventional; and we took a great fancy to each other."

"I hope she has a little more mind than some of your fancies."

"Oh, she is rather a brainy person. Her father is immensely learned, and her brother is scientific. But of course we shall see them at Mrs. Tranmore's party."

Desmond was listening to this trivial talk with a wildly beating heart. There was to be a party after the play, a party to meet the players. He had consented with extreme reluctance to go in Mrs. Warden's train ; and now his heart throbbed with sweet expectancy. He would meet her, his guardian angel, the girl in whom all his ambitions centred. To make himself worthy of her ! It was for that end he strove for fame and means, to win a name that she might not blush to bear, and an income that would ensure all things meet for domestic happiness. He scarcely knew how entirely her influence ruled his life, and how the fond dream of meeting her again, some day, a far off day, perhaps, had given fire to his genius in its happier hours, and had held him constant and relentless in effort, when the lamp of fancy burnt low, in that dismal swamp of depression and discontent which every imaginative writer has to cross at some stage of his work.

To meet her now would be a premature bliss : since he had no tribute to bring her but an unpublished novel, no achievement worthy of her. He had fancied himself going back to the moorland vicarage one day, when his name was established in the world of letters, and offering himself to her as the creature her charity had made. He had pictured her living always in that remote spot, always fancy-free, ready for the lover who worshipped her as few women are worshipped. And all the time he had thought of her in her moorland solitude she had been living within twenty miles of him : surrounded with admirers, perhaps ; soldiers and civilians, Berkshire and Buckinghamshire squires, hunting and shooting men, the gentlemen of England who live at home at ease, and compared with whom a man who lived by his pen might seem a poor creature. Notwithstanding his sloping chin Sir Harry Bennington, the Romeo, was considered a youth of infinite attractions, well-born and wealthy,

a young man whom very few girls would refuse, slightly as Muriel had talked of him.

It was premature bliss to meet her so soon, and bliss that might be followed by despair. What hope could he have of seeming worthy in her eyes? Would not his position as secretary and house-steward to a rich woman stamp him as a poor creature, effeminate, of the tame-cat species, liking a comfortable corner in a well-found house? To charm a girl of her high spirit he ought to have been fighting for his country, or even in some foreign legion, or wandering in some savage land, enduring intolerable hardships, shooting lions in arid deserts, or digging for gold by an Arctic river.

A secretary, a man to take instructions, and write business letters and cheques for tradesmen! What could seem more petty and trivial, nay more contemptible, in the eyes of young romance? And he knew her romantic temperament. It was to that he owed his salvation.

Well, he was to see her again, perhaps to hold her hand in his. That was the paramount thought.

Colonel Tranmore's house stood in spacious grounds on the edge of the Park, a new house, large, red, comfortable, and uninteresting, a house that was only handsome when full of light and flowers, and well dressed people, as it was this evening, when Mrs. Tranmore welcomed her friends. She was one of the amateur committee who had laboured most strenuously to ensure success for the performance. Her niece was the Lady Capulet, her son was the Mercutio. All the earlier rehearsals had taken place in her music-room. She had lunched and dined the performers with abundant hospitality; insomuch that her husband had made severe remarks upon the amount of the weekly cheque for the tradesmen's books, during that rather lengthy period of incubation.

"My dear Dick, you don't want us to make fools of ourselves, as we should if we didn't have plenty of rehearsals."

"I never wanted you to go in for the stupid business," retorted the Colonel. "It would have been cheaper for me to write a cheque for fifty pounds and have done with it."

"Cheaper! I hate looking at everything in that light. Consider what an opportunity it is for Ethel. Only just out, and seeing those eligible young men every day. I shouldn't be surprised if she were Lady Bennington before next summer."

"I should. Ethel isn't half as taking as Miss Whatshername—the girl who acts Juliet."

"If Ethel was your niece instead of mine you'd think her much prettier."

"No, I shouldn't. I've not your kind of eye. I see things as they are, not as I want 'em to be."

Notwithstanding much preliminary grumbling Colonel Tranmore was in high spirits to-night, and received his guests, many of them unknown or unremembered, as if he lived only to entertain them. Certainly Jock's Mercutio had been second only to Wyndham as a masterpiece in light comedy.

"If he got sick of the army the fellow might make his fortune on the stage," the colonel thought; which is the idea of every parent, guardian, or friend, when an aspiring amateur covers himself with glory by a slavish imitation of his favourite actor. Jock had studied Sir Charles's elocution till he was able to reproduce voice and accent almost as well as a gramophone.

Jack was Jock, not because he had Scottish blood in his veins, but because Jack sounded common and Jock was distinguished. He came bustling up, with the Mercutio fire and verve, when the Lorriford party arrived, and took possession of Muriel.

"You must be dying for supper, after having been bored to death by that long play," he said.

"My dear Jock, we can't possibly go to supper till the other actors are here," cried his mother. "It's all very well for you who were killed in the third act."

"I suppose we must wait for them," said Jock resignedly, and then to Muriel and her grandmother—"But you'll take an ice, or some tea?"

Mrs. Warden and Muriel accepted tea, though they had disregarded the invitation of black-coated hirelings at the door of the tea-room. It would be something to do, and they both went off with Jock, Mrs. Warden talking enthusiastically of the Juliet, and not too severe upon the Romeo.

"After all he did his best," she said.

"And his best was devilish bad," said Jock, still as Mercutio. "Major Bane's Tybalt was a far better bit of acting."

"If he were not quite so stout."

"You mean if he were about half his present size. He could act Falstaff without any padding, poor chap; but his Tybalt was a good little bit of character."

Desmond did not go with them, though Muriel had looked back pleadingly. Sentimental seventeen never forgets to be attentive to the object of her dreams.

He took his stand in a corner near the door, waiting for the players to arrive. He must see her as she crossed the threshold in the vivid light of the electric lamps. His hostess had taken particular notice of him, Muriel having expatiated upon his gifts as a writer of essays and articles which all the world ought to have read.

"You must have been charmed with those delicious essays in the *Orb*," Muriel told her, "but you may not have noticed the signature, 'Candle-holder.' Shakespearian, don't you know,—from this very play. 'I'll be a candle-holder and look on.'"

Mrs. Tranmore was one of the educated millions

who never read ; but she had a kind of tepid interest in a writer as a curious person. She would give him one of her too numerous dowagers to take to supper. Though she knew nothing about him, and had never read a line of his writing, she could put him forward as a celebrity. Mrs. Tranmore was past mistress in the art of making use of people. People were the pieces on the chess-board on which she played the game of life.

The actors arrived at last, having taken an unconscionable time in getting out of their costumes and make-up. The fiery Tybalt, who had made himself a murderous desperado, was transformed into the mildest of men. Sir Harry Bennington, out of his Romeo costume, was a living example of what velvet, gold lace, stage jewels, and an admirable wig can do for insipid youth ; while the niece of the house had dressed herself in a white frock and blue sash, like a school-girl, just to show people how obliging she had been to wear a high black velvet gown and ruff, and to paint two Indian ink wrinkles across her baby-brow ; and lastly came Juliet in a long black gown, with a Honiton lace fichu. Desmond thrilled at the sight of the simple black frock and white pelerine. It was like the frock she wore that night. He loved her all the more for the dear remembrance. In no other dress could she have looked so exquisite.

He drank the sweetness of her voice as she talked to Mrs. Tranmore.

“ Thank you very much, the dressing-room was delightful. It was so kind of you to send furniture. My maid was astonished. She thought actresses had to dress in pigstyes. But I shouldn’t have minded discomfort. I was thinking of nothing but my part.”

“ No wonder. You are a born actress. You would have a brilliant career, if——”

“ Oh, please don’t flatter me. I only just spoke

the words. They are so lovely. It is the play that was good—not I—or any of us. It was so wise of you to choose Shakespeare."

"People told me I was bereft of reason when I proposed *Romeo and Juliet*—but I know none of our company would have worked half as hard for a modern play. Shakespeare put them on their mettle."

"Was my father satisfied? Ah! there he is. I'll go and ask him."

She crossed the room in quest of him. She walked slowly, threading her way through the crowd, like a person who thinks. She had none of Muriel's darting movements.

Muriel reappeared at this moment, with Jock still at her heels, Jock, who in his own phrase, was "taken with her," but she broke away from Jock and went to Desmond.

"Why didn't you come to tea?" she asked.

"I had a cup at the theatre."

"Horrid weak stuff. This was delicious. Real tea—not out of a kettle. What have you been doing? Talking to the performers? Have you been worshipping Miss Penroyal?"

"I have not been introduced to her."

"Let me introduce you. There she is, near the fire-place. You can see her lovely head, over that podgy major. How nice to be as tall as that!"

"Or to be small and a thing of airy motion like Titania," said Desmond, smiling down at her.

He was obliged to say pleasant things occasionally. She was so sweet-tempered, so eager to be kind to him; and in her little "coming on" ways, there was nothing fast or immodest. It was a romantic girl's half unconscious homage to what she took for genius—embarrassing to a man who had given his heart away before he met her, but not repulsive.

"Oh, don't please! Think what a horror Titania is when she gets fat."

She led him to the other end of the room, where Sir Emanuel Penroyal and his daughter were standing side by side.

"Oh, Vera, I want so much to introduce Mr. Desmond, who is dying to tell you how immensely he admired your Juliet."

"Miss Hammond has spoken for me," he said, looking full in the lovely face, where at first there was no sign of recognition.

But he saw a change of expression at the sound of his voice, a look that suggested the awakening of memory. She looked at him thoughtfully, earnestly, inquiringly, but uttered no word.

"Of course it would take pages to say all that I could say about your acting," he said, and now he was sure that she remembered, for the inquiring glance had changed to a steady look, half thought, half wonder.

"He will write one of his delightful essays about you," said Muriel. "An amateur Juliet, or he might call it just 'Shakespeare's Juliet.' "

Still no speech came from the lips he adored, and before those lips had spoken, Mrs. Tranmore was at his elbow murmuring insinuatingly.

"I want you to take Lady Mountclarges into supper; and please don't let her sit in a draught, or she'll never forgive me. I have told her how charmingly you write; and she is dying to know you."

Lady Mountclarges was an immense person in myrtle green velvet, unwieldy in mind as in body, but the essence of good nature, and Desmond took conscientious care of her, planting her at the most sheltered table in the room, all the more willingly when he saw Romeo and Juliet and Mercutio and Muriel heading for an adjacent table.

She was near him; he heard her voice in light trivial talk, while he made his dowager happy with aspics and truffles and champagne.

After supper there was dancing, a waltz or two to Strauss music discoursed by a pianola. Juliet took two or three turns with her Romeo, and Desmond heard a cavalry man tell his partner that it would be a match : but he watched her face as she danced, and he saw no spark of Love's fire. She could never tolerate that sloping chin, and that straw-coloured hair.

He had no chance of speech with her ; but their glances met more than once, and he knew that she had recognized him, in spite of his altered aspect. As he stood before her, prosperous and well-clad, she knew him for the grey spectre, the foot-sore fugitive, whom her hands had fed.

The journey home was a dream of exquisite emotion. He was so silent that Muriel thought him asleep. He heard her asking Mrs. Warden to invite Vera Penroyal for a week-end.

“ It's too far for her to come to lunch, and I am dying to see more of her. She is mountains above the ruck of girls. I suppose that is because her father educated her. He took you into supper. How did you like him ? ”

“ Very nice, very polite and kind ; but with a far away air. He seems to know nothing and care nothing about Windsor or London. He talked of his son, who is doing great things at Oxford—in the science schools.”

“ Stinks,” exclaimed Muriel. “ My Oxford ideal is Greek. Homer, Æschylus, Sophocles.”

She had Desmond's book-shelf in her mind. The things he did not care for were not culture.

He was entranced at the prospect she unfolded. Vera as a house friend. The two girls would grow fond of each other ; and Vera would be often at Lorryngford. It would be like living in the near radiance of a star. She would make his life dazzling.

“ How shall I ever keep my head when she is

there," he wondered. "How shall I calculate rates and taxes, and tradesmen's books? How shall I keep my secret from Muriel?"

In all his long reverie there was no shadow of fear that his benefactress of the past could betray him in the present. He knew that whatever she thought of him, even if she despised him for the trivial use he had made of his liberty, she would keep his secret. He was her convict, the unhappy wretch she had waited for, eager to help and save. No, he had not a shadow of doubt as to her goodness, or her discretion. She was no less wise than kind.

It was a fortnight later when she arrived on a Saturday afternoon with her buxom North Devon maid. Randolph was still there, having shown no disposition to depart. He had indeed told his grandmother that he was awfully run down when he came to Lorrington, and that he felt the place was doing him no end of good.

"Stay as long as you like, my dear boy," she said. "A few months more or less won't matter; but remember you have to make up your mind about your career. I have written to a friend in Rhodesia, a man who is developing a large estate for tobacco. Tobacco is the thing, you know. If every young man in England smokes as much as you, the consumption must be stupendous."

"South African tobacco will take a long time to get into the market," Randolph said. "It'll be like Cape sherry. People won't take kindly to it."

"Yes, they will—if it's good and cheap."

"I think I could do better sheep-farming in Queensland. I've met men, quite common men, who have made fortunes sheep-farming."

"Perhaps that was because of their commonness. I'm afraid you're not common enough. In Queensland you'd have a hard life, and nobody to give you a helping hand. But if your grandfather's friend,

Hugh Craddock, takes you on his plantation, you'll be put in the right way."

"Of course I want to do what you would like, Grannie; but it's rather difficult for a lady to understand what's best for a young man."

"Not when the lady has been a working woman on a Griqualand farm. I've had to rough it; and I know exactly what roughing it means for a young man. It means the making of him, Rannie."

Her grandson might have told her that he didn't want to be made in that way. The mill was a very fine mill, but he didn't want to be ground in it.

But his grandmother was the writer of cheques, she who must be obeyed. He told her that he gave his destiny into her keeping, and she might dispose of him as she pleased. She offered him her hand cordially, with her sweetest smile. He pressed the kind hand, and tried to reflect the smile; and then he went out of doors across the lawn to the river bank, and a cloud of gloom fell over him, as it had fallen of late whenever he was alone. He walked a long way, and came back only just in time to dress for dinner; and the same black care that had gone out with him in the morning came home with him at night.

Muriel had been thinking of him a good deal in the last fortnight, and had been planning a life of bliss which it rested with himself to achieve. He was to fall desperately in love with Vera Penroyal; and she was to return his affection. Why not? He was handsome, attractive, sufficiently clever, and his grandmother would no doubt provide liberally for him, if he made a satisfactory marriage. Vera was well-born, and would have money from her father. It would be a splendid match.

To this end the artless damsel expatiated upon her brother's gifts of person and mind, on the afternoon of Vera's arrival, seizing the opportunity offered by a ramble in the grounds and on the hill

terrace, and putting a stress upon the subject which was eminently calculated to set Vera against the over-praised youth.

"I suppose he took a good degree at the 'Varsity," Vera said, thinking of her own brother, for whom, and for herself in sympathy, Oxford was the hub of the universe. "I hope he is a dark blue."

"He was not at the 'Varsity. You see he was meant for the army."

"Is he going into a cavalry regiment?" Vera asked, willing to be interested.

She had a rather grand idea of soldiers, gained from autobiographies of heroes, and stories of famous battles.

"No. He has given up the army. My father put him with the wrong coach—an utterly hopeless man at the sea-side, false economy—and he didn't pass his exam."

"Oh, but he should have tried again, and again, and again," said Vera with kindling eyes.

"There wasn't time. There's that horrid age limit."

"Then what is he going to be?"

"His ideal career is a life of adventure—in Queensland—or on the Klondike; or he might join a Polar expedition if he could get a chance. Grannie wants him to grow tobacco in Rhodesia, which to my mind suggests only sunstroke, or enteric fever. And he is so clever, and would do so well at home—at the Bar, for instance."

"Wouldn't Mrs. Warden approve of his going to the Bar?"

"I don't know. Grannie has odd ideas. My grandfather was such a terrible worker, and made his fortune in South Africa, doing everything for himself; and Grannie thinks no young man ought to have an easy time, however gifted he may be. Brains are to go for nothing. He must work with pickaxe and spade, or something equally unpleasant."

Hard lines, isn't it, for a young man brought up in an intellectual *milieu*, and having lived with wits and authors in London?"

Vera listened kindly to all this sisterly talk. She, too, could have talked of her brother, whom she adored. She thought Muriel's naïveté charming; but there was someone else she wanted to hear about.

"Apropos of authors," she said, "I think you told me Mrs. Warden's secretary is writing a book."

"Yes, but he doesn't want it talked about. His book is a kind of second self, another life, don't you know? I believe when he sits in his lonely room at the lock-house late at night we are all thousands of miles away. He forgets that we exist. The characters in his story are the only living creatures in the universe. Lovely, isn't it, to be able to make a world and people it?"

"With shadows," said Vera, smiling at her enthusiasm, "with broken-backed shadows sometimes; empty forms that nobody else can believe in, even if the writer does. But I want you to tell me about Mr. Desmond. Have you and Mrs. Warden known him long?"

"Not long in actual weeks and months, but it seems a life time."

And thereupon Muriel told the story of her grandmother's peril, and Desmond's rescue.

"I can understand your feeling grateful," Vera remarked calmly, "but after all it was not a wonderful thing for him to do, if he is a good swimmer."

"It is not wonderful, because brave men think nothing of risking their lives. But if you could have seen the river that day you would have known that he saved her at his own peril. If she had not been a reasonable woman she would have dragged him under; but she recovered her presence of mind in the moment of danger, and she let him save her."

" And how did he happen to be at the lock-house ? "

" He is living there. He came there for peace and quiet."

And then she told Vera all about the former secretary ; and how George Desmond had consented to take up the work of which that worthy person had proved incapable.

" And is that all you know about him ? " Vera asked.

" All ! We know everything about him. Grannie is devoted to him. She has got to the back of his mind. Their ideas are in complete harmony ; or when they do disagree about anything it is only just enough to give zest to their conversation. Since he has been Grannie's secretary I hardly see anything of him, except on a Sunday. On week days he establishes himself in his den while we are at breakfast, and sneaks away in the afternoon. He hates wasting his time on us—except on Sundays, when he condescends to come to luncheon. You'll see him to-morrow, and be able to judge for yourself."

## CHAPTER XI.

THEY met at church, where Vera's convict looked the pink of all that is respectable. There was no hint of Bohemia in his clothes or bearing. He had made up his mind when his hair and beard were grown, and he was able to go to a tailor, that his best chance of baffling suspicion was to clothe himself in the raiment of the common-place and the ultra respectable. There must be nothing distinctive or unconventional in his appearance. He must look like a man who had a life of humdrum twenty-shillings-in-the-pound respectability behind him; so that, opinion being mostly governed by appearances, it could hardly occur to anyone to connect him with a story of crime.

Of course, once caught he might be easily identified by the technical prison tests, the photographs and measurements and thumb and finger impressions. But having been more than a year at large, and the hue and cry having died out, and even the newspapers having apparently dropped him as an exhausted interest, he hoped that all chance of recapture was over.

Vera had a good view of her convict in the small Norman church, as he was sitting in a line with the Lorringford people, on the other side of the nave. She noted the clear profile, and well shaped head, the broad forehead, and eyes deeply set under strongly marked brows, the eyes of the thinker. Seeing

him there, carefully dressed, his dark brown hair just the proper shortness, his beard neatly trimmed, her mind went back to the prison on the moor, and she pictured him in the chapel, clad in hideous grey, with cropped head, listening with dull ears to words of joyful hope, or triumphant jubilation, that must have seemed to accentuate his wretchedness. Zion might sound her trumpets and heap her altars with innocent victims to celebrate her return from captivity ; but for him there was no hope of release while life was worth living. She looked at the calm and meditative face, and wondered that those dreadful years had not drawn deeper lines there.

Her first opportunity of confidential speech came after the service, when they all walked to the back-water, where Peacock waited with the skiff to ferry them across. Muriel was pounced upon and absorbed by some of her girl friends, who were deeply concerned in the organization of a hockey club for Lorringford and two adjacent villages ; a scheme in which Mrs. Warden took a grandmotherly interest, and indeed had offered one of her meadows for the use of the players, too good an offer to be refused, as it would assuredly include a sumptuous tea at her house.

It was during the hockey talk that Vera and Desmond managed to fall into the rear, and to find themselves walking side by side, very slowly, so as to make the most of their opportunity. They slackened their pace as if moved by the same impulse.

“ Were you very much surprised to meet me ? ” she asked.

“ Your appearance was like the materialization of a thought. I think you must understand how continually I have thought of you, after your inestimable goodness to me.”

“ It was not very much to do. I had always been interested in the prison. It was the only big

human thing on the moor. I was so sorry for those poor grey men ; and I made up my mind that if ever a runaway prisoner came in my way I would do all I could to help him."

" You helped me most effectually. Everything has gone well with me since that October dawn."

" And you are happy here, you like your position ? "

" I am happy because I am doing the work I love, and have leisure for reading the books I love."

" You were lucky in finding such good friends."

" After my luck in finding you, no other good thing that happens to me counts for much."

" Perhaps you knew Mrs. Warden before your trouble began ? " Vera questioned.

" I had no knowledge of her existence till I pulled her out of the river."

" And did you tell her your story ? "

" I told her nothing."

" You accepted a position of trust without telling her where you had been ? "

" You think that I acted dishonourably ? "

" It is not my idea of honour. But I know so little of the world ; and I may not be capable of judging."

" You are incapable of thinking any thoughts that are not noble. Perhaps I have acted too much as a man of the world. Had I been guilty of the crime for which I was made to suffer so cruelly five years of my life—the five best years of youth—my conscience would not have allowed me to remain silent. But I was a victim, not a delinquent ; and I know myself incapable of dishonesty. I know that I can give that dear lady good service, can defend her from the leeches that hang on to a great fortune, and can help to make life pleasant to her. She has, I believe, in her fine generous nature, an instinct that tells her whom she can trust ; and she has trusted me."

"Would she trust you less if you risked all, and told her the truth about yourself ? "

"I don't know. There are prejudices hard to overcome. A man convicted of fraud, associated with four other men in a daring series of forgeries ! Would she believe that where four men were guilty the fifth was innocent ? Generous as she is, there are limits even to her faith in mankind. Generous as you are, I doubt if you can believe me."

"Oh, I want to believe you. It was my dream that my convict would be an innocent man, falsely accused, falsely condemned. But remember that I know nothing of your history except scraps my father read out of the newspapers immediately after your escape, never dreaming that I had helped you."

"I will tell you everything, the first half-hour that we can be alone, but I will tell no one else. It will not be easy for me, because I must say hard things of my unhappy father, whom I dearly loved, whose bones are lying in the grave-yard at Prince Town. To Mrs. Warden, and to anybody I am to know in the future, I hold myself free to bury that hateful secret in the grave of a forgotten life. There is nothing—except your knowledge, and that of two or three other people—to associate me with the man from Dartmoor. I was tried and convicted under an alias, and the name I bear now is my own, and was never connected with fraud."

"I am glad of that. I begin to understand. Oh ! there is Mrs. Warden waiting for us."

Muriel and her grandmother were in a group of people by the landing-stage, a group which scattered as Desmond and Vera approached.

"How earnestly you two have been talking," said Muriel, with a look that showed she had been watching them while she conversed with her friends. "Were you discussing the sermon ? It was not one of his powerful flights."

This was an allusion to the curate, who out

of the croquet season, when he could give his mind to theology, was apt to startle his congregation by his advanced views, which were generally echoes from the review of a German theologian, in one of the *Quarterlies*.

Vera owned that they had not been talking of the sermon, but made no attempt to account for their earnestness. Desmond had his dinghy at the landing stage, and took himself across the water, while the three ladies sat at ease in the comfortably-cushioned skiff, rowed by Peacock, whose elbows and legs looked stiffer than usual in his Sunday clothes.

After luncheon, and half an hour's dawdling over coffee cups in the drawing-room, where the wood fire made an atmosphere of coloured light, Muriel suggested a walk in the grounds and a visit to the dairy.

"You'll come, of course, Randolph," she told her brother, who had been placed next Vera at the leisurely meal, and had made feeble attempts at conversation with a girl who had not come out of his particular garden of girls, and was an unfamiliar flower.

He sprang up at the invitation, pronouncing himself delighted.

"I suppose you would think it much too boring to come with us," Muriel said to Desmond.

On the contrary, he was eager for a walk, and was not too tired of the dairy. They all went. Mrs. Warden marching ahead with Vera and Randolph, secretly pleased at seeing these two walking side by side, and hoping that her grandson was making a tolerable impression. Muriel had urged the duty of match-making arts in this particular instance, since all that Randolph wanted to keep him in the straight path was a delightful wife. She was sorry to see that his manner with an intelligent and attractive girl was by no means perfect. He could find very little to say, after he had asked Vera if she had

been to all the London theatres, and had been confronted by the disconcerting fact that she had seen none of them, which offered a dead wall to conversation ; till, with a kind of inspiration, he asked if she rode to hounds, and discovered that she rode a good deal, but only got a little forest hunting in October. He then, in another luminous moment, asked her if she had any dogs, and that subject lasted them till the end of their walk.

Muriel had contrived to detain Desmond in the rear, and she held him with a grip of iron. She wanted to know what he thought of Vera. There had been plenty of time for him to make up his mind.

In the first place, did he not think her lovely ?

Many a man is mean enough to fence with a question of this kind, if he suspects the questioner of a *penchant* for himself ; but Desmond replied with perfect frankness, and owned that he thought Miss Penroyal a beautiful girl.

“ It is more perhaps in expression than in features,” Muriel suggested, “ for her nose is a shade too long.”

He declined to discuss her in detail.

“ I take her as perfect and complete, like one of those exquisite portraits by Reynolds which make one think that all women were lovely in the time of the Georges,” he said.

“ Will Sargent convey the same impression a hundred years hence ? ”

“ I think not—an impression of supreme art perhaps, but not of supreme beauty.”

“ What *were* you and Vera talking of this morning ? ” Muriel asked, with a sudden petulance. “ You seemed both so terribly in earnest.”

“ You remind me of the people who put meanings and mysteries into a book, meanings that the author never thought of. What were we talking about ? How can I remember such trivial talk ? About the

church most likely—or about the river, the landscape, the sky, the sort of things people talk about on a fine Sunday morning.”

“All I can say is you did not look like casual talkers.”

There came a silence of at least three minutes, a rare thing with Muriel.

Desmond walked a little faster, and would have overtaken the others, if Muriel would have allowed him, but she would not.

Alas, alas! This “coming on” disposition in seventeen years and a half is so pitifully transparent. The girl can no more hide her liking for the man she has elected as her ideal than the child could hide her liking for jam tarts, or strawberries and cream. She betrays herself unconsciously a hundred times a day. In his absence she cannot refrain from talking of him, however unresponsive the auditors. When he is present no one else lives for her, and she cannot keep her eyes from watching him. She knows his footstep; and her eyes are on the door as he enters. She adopts his opinions, and likes the things he likes. She admires his hand-writing, and almost unconsciously tries to write like him. If he has praised some piece of music, however casually, she practises it as she has never practised before. She puts her whole soul into the sonata, or the gigue, or the rigadoon, or the réverie, that she thinks he loves. The house echoes to no other melody, and people ask her impatiently why she is always strumming the same tune. Poor child! She has no other tune; her life moves to only one measure. If he praises a book she pores over it, and reads himself into it, if it be a romance; or she would read a treatise on geometry, and try to understand it, only to be more in sympathy with him.

She is not bold or immodest. She has no thought, no instinct, that would distress her guardian angel to record in the dreadful book; but innocently,

unknowingly, she lets her idol see that he is worshipped, sometimes very much to the idol's embarrassment.

It was so with Desmond, who was no coxcomb, and who had come to understand, with infinite pain, that this sweet girl had given him a love that he could never give back, had asked him for a heart that had been given away before he met her. He told himself that it was of all feeling the most transitory, this love of seventeen summers, no more indeed than the prelude on a girl's heart-strings, the prelude for the grand melody that is to come later. It was like the flutter of young birds that have not learnt to fly. He had no fear that this pretty creature would break her heart for him. He remembered his own calf love for a doctor's handsome daughter, black eyes, black hair, black stockings, glancing from the hem of a white boating frock. It had been a passion that took the taste out of all the common things of earth. Half a year of joy and pain, doubt, jealousy, rapture and despair, and then came the girl's marriage, and the inevitable cure, cure by way of sorrow, the slow and lingering recovery from the agony of a vanished dream. He was not afraid of a broken heart at seventeen ; but he wanted to save a sweet girl from useless pain, even if it were only the suffering of a week. He was very fond of Muriel, as a charming child-sister ; and he wanted, if possible, to keep her friendship, after he had slain her love. He wanted to set himself right with her, and with himself, and perhaps this afternoon's walk, which she in a manner insisted upon making a *tête-à-tête*, would be a good opportunity.

" You look awfully bored," she said, having possessed her soul in silence for exactly three minutes. " Wouldn't you rather go back to the house and read the papers ? You needn't mind me. I can go on with the others."

“ I would rather talk to you, if you will let me.”

“ Why, I am only waiting for you to talk. I want you to tell me what English classic I am to read next. I have finished Goldsmith—poor plain dear ! ”

“ Then I should recommend Addison and Steele. You have a fine edition of the *Spectator* series in the library. Begin with the *Guardian*. ”

“ Thank you. I certainly will, though when I tried at Gran’pa’s recommendation I had to give up ; but I was only thirteen, and I couldn’t understand how anybody could read essays. Since I’ve read yours I know how delightful an essay can be. I’ll give Addison another chance.”

“ I was going to talk about myself, if you will forgive my egotism.”

“ I shall be enchanted. To hear you talk of yourself will be a revelation. You have never told Grannie nor me anything about your own life.”

“ I have been silent because the story of my life would be sad for me to relate, and painful for you to hear. Mrs. Warden has been so unspeakably kind in taking me on trust, for what I am, without reference to antecedents or surroundings.”

“ What could she want to learn—more than yourself ? It was quite enough to know you. But now that we are old friends you may be more inclined to trust us with the story of your childhood and youth, your joys and sorrows, the people you have loved and lost.”

“ My story is all of loss. My mother died when I was a little boy at a preparatory school. My father died seven years ago.”

It was the date of his father’s sentence that he named, the date of his moral death, which to his mind was the end of all things for that unhappy man.

“ I have neither brother nor sister, uncles nor aunts. I am the last of a vanishing race.”

“ How sad that sounds ! ”

"I want to tell you something more personal—the one event that colours my life in the present and in the future."

Muriel turned to him quickly. There was an almost tragic look in her eyes, a swift apprehension of something that was to come. Her perceptions were of lightning rapidity where he was concerned, and she had caught the tone of his voice, and had divined that he was going to tell of someone else, some far off rival, long loved, someone who stood between her and every desire of her young heart, whose mere existence made her life hopeless.

She waited, eyes wide with tragic wonder, lips apart, waited for her death sentence, for what less than death is the end of a love dream to romantic seventeen? He saw the look, and it smote him with sudden remorse. He could not accuse himself of a single word or act that was calculated to delude her. He had been scrupulously formal and reserved, dry-as-dust, business-like, everything that a man in love could not be. But he had not reckoned with the foolishness of a sentimental girl, and he understood all at once that it would have been better for him to be more of a coxcomb, more willing to believe himself, under certain conditions, irresistible, and to have saved this dear girl from a fool's paradise.

"Of course she would think I must needs be in love with her; young, pretty, with expectations; the cynosure of neighbouring eyes, the admired of all the best young men between Henley and Windsor."

"The one event," she repeated in a low voice.  
"That sounds very serious."

"To me it is more serious than life or death. Some time ago I was in great trouble, greater than you, in your happy life, could possibly imagine; and a woman saved me. Young, and beautiful, and kind, she held out her hand to me in my hour of

supreme distress, and saved me from shipwreck. Generous, courageous, intelligent, I owe her all that I am, all that I ever can be; and I love her as women are not often loved."

There was a silence that seemed long, a silence broken only by one half stifled sound, one smothered sob, hoarse and low, and then Muriel said very quietly—

"I am glad you have told me. You might have trusted me sooner. You might have been sure of my sympathy."

He had not ventured to look at her while he made his confession, and stealing a look now he saw that all the sweet rose-bud colouring had left her cheeks and lips.

"I am sure of the uttermost kindness from you and your grandmother."

"Oh, you may be sure of Grannie. You ought to have told her before. Grannie will be quite enchanted. Grannie will be all sympathy."

She emphasized the assertion with a laugh, that had a slightly hysterical sound. They were near the dairy by this time, but she stopped suddenly.

"Please go on without me," she said. "I've one of my headaches coming on, I'm afraid, and I shall run back to the house and rest until the dressing-bell."

"Let me go back with you."

She refused peremptorily, and he was obliged to submit. She was very decided, and had a more womanly air than he had ever seen in her. The play-time of her youth was over. She had played at love, and had been hurt in the game. He stood and watched her as she walked slowly across the lawn, with steady steps, and her head held high. He remembered how she had fainted on the river bank; but she was not the fainting sort. She had plenty of pluck when the occasion called for it.

He thought of her tenderly from the remoteness

of his eight and twenty years, thought of her as a romantic child, but he knew that he had done right in making his confession to her. It had come about naturally, and she would not think that he suspected her fondness. There might be some slight restraint between them at first, perhaps, which would prevent her questioning him about the woman he loved, and then someone else would appear upon the scene of her young life, the someone else who is the one infallible cure for the broken heart of seventeen.

## CHAPTER XII.

VERA went home on Tuesday morning, and carried Muriel with her, for a visit of at least a week. At Windsor there was gaiety in the very air, and always something happening in the way of a party—to dance—or hear music, or play cards. Mrs. Warden accepted Vera's unpremeditated invitation with gladness. Her darling had been laid up with a neuralgic headache on Sunday evening, and had been pale and dull on Monday; so it was a pleasure to see her somewhat brisker on Tuesday morning, engaged with Lucille, in the serious consideration of frocks to take and frocks to leave at home.

"No, no, not the pink chiffon, I've worn it to death."

"But there is nothing that so becomes Mademoiselle, and I can iron the frillings," urged Lucille.

Even with a breaking heart these details must be considered.

"The heart may break, but brokenly live on."

That line had been in Muriel's mind since Sunday afternoon. She had to live. She had to be nice to her dearest Grannie, and to think of Randolph's interest, and make opportunities for him with Vera, opportunities which he was so slow to seize, so feeble to turn to account. She had even to go

on eating the normal amount of food, though not with her normal appetite ; for to refuse more than two courses would have caused fuss and consternation. She had to pretend that her heart had nothing the matter with it.

She went off to the station with her grandmother and Vera in the landau, after luncheon, a cart following with a pile of dress-baskets, and the two maids in a fly. Mrs. Warden had insisted on seeing them off, and had stuffed Muriel's purse with gold.

"I know your allowance must have run out darling, so near December."

Muriel owned that she had changed her last sovereign. Her allowance was for gloves, and the mere trifling adjuncts of the toilet, and for pocket money. The dressmaker's bills, the tailor's, the milliner's, were paid by her grandmother. The allowance had been begun when she entered that dignified stage of a girl's life known as her teens. Mrs. Warden wanted her to learn the use of money, and her use so far had been to let it ooze out of her purse she hardly knew how, leaving emptiness at least a month before the end of the quarter. On the three last Sundays she had to borrow church money from Lucille, a loan usually repaid with interest at cent. per cent.

Lorringford House seemed curiously empty when that young life had vanished, the gay voice calling the dogs, the piano, the snatches of song in the corridors and on the stairs, the light footsteps, and the frou-frou of a frock, as its wearer made little rushes in and out between garden and hall. The absence of seventeen made a strange silence. Randolph was out all day—shooting—or rowing—or going one knew not whither, on his own business.

Desmond had made a study of that fortunate youth. In his regard for Mrs. Warden and Muriel he was anxious to know what manner of

man this was, the only man belonging to them, since it was an admitted fact that Muriel's father was a negligible quantity, a person whom it was safer to ignore than to inquire about.

Mrs. Warden had told Desmond that her son-in-law's second marriage had put him entirely out of court.

"After that I could have nothing to do with him," she concluded, "and I'm very sorry my good man didn't make a better fight for the boy. It's dreadful to think of his being brought up in such an atmosphere; and I'm afraid it has left its stamp upon him."

There was certainly some kind of stamp upon the young man, Desmond thought; something that marked him as dubious, unsatisfactory, perhaps with lurking potentialities of evil. He seemed to Desmond to have grown worse since he had been living at Lorriford, where the atmosphere should have made for his improvement, blowing away the taint of bad company. The sinister lines in his countenance had deepened. His eyes when he was left to himself had a brooding look; and his manner when suddenly spoken to had a nervous shiftiness, as of one who had some bad thought to thrust out of sight before he could look the speaker in the face.

Mrs. Warden opined that the worst thing about him was his manner.

"I wish he had happier ways," she said. "He has such a want of youthful spirits. Muriel has always been a thing of joy. She reminds me of a singing bird. But Randolph is never cheerful without an effort. One sees the effort, and that spoils one's pleasure in him. His manner is sometimes quite too bad—what I can't help calling a hang-dog manner."

She told Desmond what she had done for her grandson in the disposal of her property, and how she had assured him about his future.

"I wanted to make him happy, and to get rid of any feeling of jealousy he might have about Muriel ; so I told him that nothing but bad conduct on his part would make me alter the will in which I leave him half my property. That ought to satisfy him."

"Perhaps he thinks less about his future than you suppose, and that he is only jealous of your affection for Muriel."

"Oh, but he must know that love can't be divided into equal portions. He must know that somebody always has the lion's share."

And then she explained her views about the Rhodesian tobacco fields, being always glad to discuss her affairs with her secretary and business adviser.

"If he only behaves properly and puts his shoulder to the wheel for three or four years, I shall buy him a partnership. And he will have plenty of horses to ride, and big game to shoot, and every chance of showing that he has good stuff in him. He is my daughter's son, and she was a lovely character—like Muriel, only better. She was brought up by my sister, a woman of remarkable intelligence. She was not spoilt as I spoilt Muriel."

"I don't think your affection—or even your indulgence—has done Miss Hammond any harm."

"Please call her Muriel. I know you think of her only as a charming child, and that you will never consider her in any other light."

She looked at him searchingly as she said this. She had suffered moments of uneasiness when Muriel talked of him in a sentimental strain, or showed herself too eager for his society. But she relied upon him for standing aloof—if he did not feel himself quite good enough for so rich a prize. In her own elderly way she was almost as romantic as her grand-daughter. She had given her confidence unquestioningly to a man of whose antecedents and belongings she knew absolutely nothing. There

were times when it occurred to her that she might have been unwise in this overweening faith in a stranger ; but her doubts always melted away in Desmond's presence.

" Yes," he answered, " she has been to me almost as a child ; very charming, very sweet, but on a different plane from my level. I might be forty years older—instead of ten or eleven. We are so far apart in our experience of life."

" Ah, but that would not be so if you had been heart-whole when you met her," Mrs. Warden said.

" I confess I was not heart-whole."

" Why have you not told us about your engagement ? It was not quite friendly of you to be so reserved."

" My dear Mrs. Warden, had there been any engagement, anything fixed and certain in my life, I should have been glad to tell you all about it. But there is nothing but a deep love for a woman I may never win, a woman who does not know that I love her."

" If I can help you in any way—if by doubling your salary and making your appointment a fixture for some years I could make it easier for you to marry, I should be so glad—"

" You are the kindest of friends ; but you can do nothing more for me than you have done in releasing me from my hand-to-mouth work as a journalist. You have given me leisure to work for the girl I love, to try for name and fame. Whether I win or lose, I must always be grateful for your generous help. You have done all that friendship could do."

" Well, some day, I hope you will tell me more about yourself and your people, remembering how much I have liked you without knowing anything."

" My people are no more. I stand quite alone in the world."

" And your novel ? When will that appear ? "

"Not till after Easter. I have arranged with a publisher who was good enough to like my poor essays in the *Orb*, and who is going to produce them in book form."

"They were not poor. They were rich; rich in thought and wit and fancy. They are things one wants to read again. They would make a bedside book, like 'Elia.'"

Having finished his day's work before three o'clock, Desmond made an unaccustomed use of his afternoon. He had been in the habit of giving himself an hour or two on the river, as the best and easiest kind of exercise, or he would go for a long walk, tramping the tow path, or the low river meadows for a good many miles, while he followed his dream of tragedy and comedy, just as Herbert Spencer thought out his philosophy in the fields near his dwelling. This afternoon an irresistible impulse carried him along the three miles of lane and high road between Lorringtonford and Penlow Station. He was just in time for the train to Windsor. The impulse was irresistible. He could not live without going to the place where she was living. It would be almost dark when he arrived in the royal town. He could prowl unseen, unsuspected, about the house that sheltered her, or at least within sight of lamp-lit windows, with the delicious sense of propinquity. He fully realized the foolishness of his desire, more foolish than the folly of troubadour knight in the age of ignorance and chivalry. But the foolishness did not matter, if it eased his mind, and soothed his fever of impatience to be with her.

What ages he might have to wait before he saw her and had speech with her! He counted on her return to Lorringtonford as almost a certainty. Muriel had gone for a week to Foxcopsis, and Muriel would want a second visit from Vera, longer, more intimate than the first. There was no doubt that she would reappear at Lorringtonford; but what an

aching gap of time he might have to live over before she came. There would be Christmas, and she would hardly leave her father at that season. Windsor would bristle with winter gaieties, and she would be wanted at every festivity. He might have to wait for her coming till the lengthening days of February, till the birds were building and singing in the dawn of spring, till love, till hope and the promise of the future were in the air.

It was a longish walk from the station to Sir Emanuel Penroyal's villa, but George Desmond enjoyed tramping through the mists of evening, along roads that had rural odours of newly ploughed earth and the last of the hedgerow flowers. He came to a white gate, a white lodge, and a carriage drive, beyond which many windows shone with an orange light through the grey.

The long low white house had a look of happiness, he thought, with so much of cheerful light in the windows, the walls showing white across a dusky garden.

The grounds were not large, but the house lay remote from the town and on the fringe of the forest. To Desmond, contemplating the silent scene with a tender interest, it seemed far away from the turmoil and traffic of life, poetized by loneliness and the feeling of primeval woods. His fancy made it something different from other houses. The many lighted windows, the white walls, the dark shrubberies, suggested a house in fairy-land, the silent palace full of light, which the fairy prince, or the wandering peasant, comes upon suddenly after he has lost himself in a wood. Romantic love lends a glamour to common things.

He loitered long upon the road in front of the gates, strolling slowly up and down, watching the lighted windows. Once a shadow flitted across a blind in the upper storey, *her* shadow perhaps; but

so vague was the outline that it might have been a housemaid's. He explored a narrow lane at the side of the gardens, a mere footpath, but it brought him no nearer his divinity, for a high wall shut in the grounds on this side. He could imagine an old-fashioned kitchen garden, the kind that is called a Scotch garden, where borders of hardy flowers and flowering shrubs screen the vulgar usefulness of cabbages and onions, a wall covered with old fruit trees. He remembered that other garden on the skirts of the cruel moor, the garden he had seen for only a few minutes, where he had flung himself on the ground to drink the scent of the first flowers he had smelt in five years, the garden where he had seen her kind eyes looking at him gravely in the dim light, and had divined that she was beautiful.

He hung about the spot for nearly an hour, strolling a little way into the forest, and then coming back to the road. He had no hope of seeing her even for a moment, for it was too early for her to be leaving home, if she were going out to dinner, and too late for her to be returning from an afternoon visit. It was the long quiet interval between tea and dinner. She would be at her piano perhaps; but the windows were closed, and no sound of music could reach him across the dense yew hedge and the wide parterre. All that he could get from his solitary watch was the sense of being near her, and the pleasure of knowing in what kind of place she lived. It would help him to picture her more exactly, if not more vividly, than of old, in his long reveries.

It was six o'clock when he found himself in the familiar street, the place where his footsteps—*forbidden steps*—had so often trodden in his school days at Eton, the carelessly happy days before he had begun to think.

The bright lights below, the sombre mass of towers and battlements above, the castle of long

buried kings, supreme in majesty, all came upon him as the picturesque background of those happy days ; November evenings such as this, when he had stolen away from his dame's house on some business of his own, to melt the last cheque from home, to run with light footsteps across the bridge, and up the hilly street, to his favourite shops, the confectioner's, the bookseller's, the bazaar. He remembered himself as a child of twelve, when he had still a sneaking love of the toy shop, and would have liked to buy himself a mechanical train ; as a boy of fourteen, when the tobacconist's began to be a place of delight, though the result of his purchases was not agreeable ; as a lad of sixteen, when he began to buy choice books, and expensive prints for the decoration of his study, shared with three other lads, whose tastes jarred.

Then had come the last year, when he was seventeen, and Eton seemed a something trivial and worn out and done with, in the near approach of Oxford.

That was the year of his passion for the doctor's handsome daughter, and all his money had flown across the jeweller's velvet-lined show-cases. The things he chose for his idol had seemed to him the perfection of art and beauty ; but when they came back to him a year after, sent by the girl's mother, who had found a better *parti* for her best daughter, came back disjoined from their morocco cases and velvet and satin, and somewhat damaged by a girl's careless wear, he beheld them with disgust, and flung the trumpery in a heap on his table.

“Perhaps you have a daughter who would like that rubbish,” he said to his scout, indicating the confused heap of bangles and necklets.

The scout was effusive in his gratitude. If not a daughter he had an “uncle,” and he would know how to dispose of the girl's discarded finery.

The things had been modish, the inventions and

fancies of a season, and were worth little more than their weight of nine-carat gold.

To-night, the dazzling shop-windows—brighter for his long ramble in the darkness of leafy roads, seemed to laugh at him.

“ Yes, we remember you,” they said, “ you were a boy here, without a care ; and then you were a foolish lad, desperately in love, cultivating unhappiness. You are a man now. You have lived and suffered. But are you any wiser ? Is not that aching passionate desire for a face and a voice that may never belong to you, quite as hopeless, and quite as foolish as your calf-love ? ”

And then the lighted windows of the library, the place where he had bought the new poets, the shop he had loved when he began to have aspirations, those delightful windows full of prettiness and charm, mocked him as he loitered, looking at the dainty new editions of old books.

“ Your love is no more foolish than your ambition, you who hope to win fame and pelf by your pen, to make yourself renowned as a writer in an age when every undergraduate and almost every school-girl can write, many of them as well as you, and some of them much better. Go back to London, fool, and enlist in the first cavalry regiment that is ordered for foreign service, and ride to meet your best friend, Death. Life has nothing for you that can ever make it worth living.”

That was the kind of thing the old familiar windows said to him as he loitered in front of them. He went into the confectioner’s and had tea, for old sake’s sake, and sat in a sad reverie thinking of his father’s kindness, and the cheery home at Wargrave, and of all the pleasant places that knew him no more. He had seen three of his father’s old friends at Mrs. Tranmore’s party, but there had been no look of recognition, so utterly had the bearded man

of twenty-eight, who had suffered much and thought much. changed from the undergraduate of nineteen.

He crossed the bridge and strolled along the tow-path, Maidenhead way. A veil of grey mist hung over the river, but above him the sky was one pale, translucent blue, and straight over his head Orion shone tremendous amidst a glittering company.

He was in an idle humour, could loiter as he pleased till a quarter past seven, when there was a train that would take him to Penlow. He might be late for dinner, but Mrs. Hawker would forgive him. His night's work rarely began till ten o'clock, after he had smoked the pipe of contemplation, summoning his beloved images from their dim abode.

This loafing in familiar scenes amused him. The night was exquisitely mild for late November, and he sat on a bench by the river, and dropped pebbles into the water, in sheer absence of mind, when he was startled by voices he knew.

A man's voice, low and pleading.

" You're too hard with me. I've made myself a door-mat under your feet. You ought to have some consideration."

" But if I don't happen to want a door-mat. I'm not cruel, I don't like hurting people's feelings, but I want a man, a man who can make his way in the world, and give me a good home. I'm sick of knocking about London, and never knowing where my next fiver is to come from."

" You've had a good many fivers from me, in meal or in malt."

" Yes, I know, dinners, suppers, theatres, hansom cabs, frocks and hats. You're a good sort, I know, old chap, and you've been very generous when you were flush of money ; but if you want me to chuck everybody else and marry you, and settle down in a seventy-pound a year villa in the suburbs, you must show me some security for the future. Remember, I'm ten years older than you, Ran ; and

I have to think of what may happen to me in ten years time, when my hair gets thin, and the ugly lines come across my forehead. You'll be tired of me by then."

"Never, never, never," he said, passionately. "Time won't make any difference. It's you I'm in love with, not your good looks."

"Don't talk rot."

They were walking slowly, side by side, the man's hand slipped through the woman's arm, as if he thought she might escape him. They passed on out of earshot. The man was Randolph Hammond; and the woman was the uncovenanted Mrs. Farrowgate. Desmond did not move from his seat by the river, and went on throwing stones into the water. He had no idea of hiding himself from Randolph, nor would he deliberately try to hear more than a curious chance had brought to his ears. But he felt that the discovery of this factor in Randolph's life was a matter of importance. He had known that there was something gravely wrong, some sinister fact in the background of the young man's life, some evil influence dominating him.

They came back after some minutes, and passed him slowly, walking towards the bridge.

"It's no use talking rubbish, Ran, I don't care for sentimental bosh. I told you what things had come to in my last letter; and it wasn't much good your coming to meet me if you can't see your way to paying Jethro. He means mischief, and he's got a bill of sale on every stick in my flat. He can sell me up to-morrow—and he won't wait long."

"Three hundred and eighty pounds," groaned Randolph. "Do you think I can coin money?"

"No! But you ought to be able to coin your grandmother. He'll take instalments—fifty pounds at a time—but the interest will go on till he's paid in full. And you know I've had an offer of marriage

from a fellow who would pay the total ten times over, and laugh."

They were out of ear-shot again; but they stopped short at the bridge, and when they came back he was urging her to marry him, talking wildly.

"I'd never forgive you if you married anybody else. You mustn't, Belle. You wouldn't dare if you knew how I love you—if you knew what a mad, miserable wretch I should be if you threw me over. It would mean murder. I wouldn't let you belong to another man. You know what tortures you've made me suffer with your flightiness; but you've kept straight, I know you've kept straight, since you began to be really fond of me."

"Poor old Rannie," she murmured, with a touch of tenderness, almost as if she had been speaking to a child.

"I know you've been straight. I was not afraid even when we've been parted."

They passed again, and melted into the pale mist, two shadowy figures: then after five minutes they returned and re-passed him.

He had been telling her about his grandmother's plans, about Rhodesia.

"You'd go with me, Belle. If you really care for me, as you've sworn you do, you wouldn't think it a sacrifice—just for three or four years. You'd go?"

"Not much," she answered, with her coarse laugh, the laugh her admirers thought delightful, however much it might jar upon sensitive ears. "Not much, my dear old Ran. Of course I care for you—always have cared since you made such a fool of yourself about me; but I'm not going to expatriate—expatriate—myself for any man living," she concluded, with a blundering attempt at an unfamiliar verb.

"We should have a comfortable home, Belle; good horses, plenty of servants."

“Kaffirs! Thank you.”

“And it’s a splendid climate.”

“I don’t care twopence for climate. Do you suppose I go to Monte Carlo for the climate? I want plenty of people—and plenty of amusements. I get the horrors in a solitary place—I’ve had ‘em at Margate—out of the season.”

Randolph stopped to strike a match, and look at his watch.

“I’ve got to rush, Belle. If I’m not home to dinner there’ll be a fuss. My sister’s away. It will be a *tête-à-tête* with Grannie; and she’s got a pair of eyes that look through you. Good-bye, old girl.”

He kissed her, and she spoke to him in a low voice, on which he pulled out his note-book and gave her something hurriedly.

“It’s my last,” he said. “I didn’t know you were so hard up as all that. You oughtn’t to have gone to an expensive hotel.”

“I didn’t know any other place; and I hate a third-rate hole, greasy mutton chops, and peppery sherry.”

“Well, I must catch my train.”

They walked together to the Great Western station, a few paces in front of Desmond, who was to travel by the same train. There was plenty of time. It was Randolph’s state of mind that made him hurry.

Desmond followed them at his leisure. He had not scrupled to hear as much of their talk as had come to him as he sat by the river. Had Randolph been anybody else he would have thought it a point of honour to go away, or to let the speakers know of his presence. He had not tried to hide himself. He had sat there, beside the path on which they walked, but on a lower level, and he had gone on dropping stones into the river. They must have known that some one was there.

He thought the circumstances warranted him in hearing as much of the conversation as chance brought to his ears. He had been making a study of Randolph Hammond, and it had been borne in upon him that this young man represented some kind of danger to Mrs. Warden and Muriel, a danger vaguely foreshadowed at present, the danger of an unprincipled young man at war with the world, and resenting the wealthy kinswoman's gospel of honest work, greedy of the pleasures wealth can buy, and shrinking from the task of money-earning.

And now that, by an accidental revelation, he knew this young man was caught in the toils of that cheap Delilah who had passed as Mrs. Farrowgate, he saw a greater danger, the danger of a bad woman behind a weak man. Mrs. Warden's pass-book had shown him the substantial amounts that her grandson had received from her ; and he could understand now where most of the money had gone. His father had told him of the woman's wanton extravagance, the reckless expenditure which had made a third-floor flat in Victoria Street as costly as a house in Mayfair, and of which Farrowgate had complained piteously in moments of despondency when he had been obliged to confide in a friend, moments when the strained mind can no longer carry its burden, and must throw it off somewhere.

Desmond kept out of Mrs. Farrowgate's way at the station, where she waited till the train went out, waving adieux to Randolph. He had taken his seat at the other end of the train, and saw her standing on the platform, as the lights flashed past, handsome, fashionably dressed, with furs that would have been warm enough for Siberia.

He encountered Randolph at Penlow Station, as they went out of the gate.

“What, have *you* been to Windsor ?” he asked, startled.

“Yes, I went by the three-thirty.”

"So did I, by Jove! Was it business or pleasure?"

"Neither. Sheer idleness. I was loafing."

"I didn't know you ever loafed. Get me a fly, porter. I'll give you a lift, if you like."

"Thank you. I'd rather walk. I shall take the short cut by the fields and the river."

"All right! I say, look here—" He went close up to Desmond, button-holing him. "I—I was strolling by the river-side with a lady—we had—well—business matters to talk about. There was a fellow sittin' on a bench—throwin' stones in the water—"

"I was that fellow," said Desmond. "But as I'm your grandmother's friend—with all honesty of purpose—and as I'm ready to be your friend, if you'll let me, it doesn't matter."

"We were—" here came a too forcible adjective—"fools to talk on a public pathway! But you might have let me know you were there."

"I might, if I had not wanted to know something about you. I knew there was something wrong; and I could imagine the kind of wrong; but I know more now."

"It's devilish impertinent of you to poke your nose into my affairs. Who are you, I should like to know? It's a queer state of things when my grandmother's salaried clerk has the cheek to preach to me."

And then there came a muttered threat about a head being punched, which in nowise disturbed Desmond; for if it came to the question of punching heads, he was ready to hold his own against Randolph.

"I am something more than Mrs. Warden's salaried clerk," he said quietly. "I am her friend, bound to her by affection and respect."

"Why you haven't known her six months."

"I have known her long enough to love her."

“Humbug.”

“And when I see danger——”

“What the devil do you mean by danger?” cried Randolph, turning upon him fiercely, white with rage; or it might be there was fear as well as anger in that ghastly pallor, apprehension that showed behind the vindictive scowl.

“Oh, there are many kinds of danger to a generous, trustful woman; the danger of being deceived in a grandson she loves; the danger of seeing disgrace and ruin come upon her daughter’s son. Don’t you call that danger?”

“No, I don’t. But if you want to know what I call things, I call your talk most consummate impertinence, and your sitting in the dark listening to my conversation with a lady, the act of a sneak.”

He jumped into the fly, and banged the door, before an obsequious porter, demoralized by Mrs. Warden’s *largesse*, could shut it for him.

“A sneak! I wouldn’t mind turning amateur detective in the interests of that good woman,” Desmond thought, as he walked by a meadow foot-path on his way to the river. “There’s mischief in Randolph Hammond, or I’m no judge of human nature, deeper mischief than there is in many a young man whom his people turn out of doors. There’s something worse than the theatre and the music-hall, late suppers, and loose company. What is it? Is it gambling—turf or cards? There’s something; some dark spot that has been widening and darkening since he came here. He was an arrogant cad when he came, but he has changed for the worse. I’ve seen the change. I’ve watched him, at first as a study, an analytical study—and of late with relation to other people—most of all to that good woman—that beneficent woman.”

This, roughly stated, was the gist of his musing, as he tramped homewards, glad to think of the quiet

night awaiting him—solitude and his book. Those were the hours he loved, when landlady and husband and son had gone to bed, and the house was hushed, and the willow logs burnt brightly on the hearth, and he sat alone, but not alone, surrounded by the creatures his imagination had made, thinking their thoughts, loving, hating, living or dying with them, crowding into those silent hours the experiences, the feelings of a lifetime. He did not want to think any more about Randolph Hammond, but he was forced to think of him, against his will. That very disagreeable figure came importunately between him and the wide world of romance. He could not forget the conversation he had heard. It seemed to him that the young man had given himself over blindly to a disastrous attachment. So far he was to be pitied. That he had chosen the very worst kind of goddess, the most surely fatal, was again a reason for pitying him ; but it augured something evil in the mind and temperament of a man who could be caught by such meretricious charms, spell-bound and subjugated by so vulgar a siren. And that he was spell-bound there could be no doubt.

If Mrs. Farrowgate would go to South Africa with him, he would accept his grandmother's offer, would go, and perhaps even work hard to maintain a home for his wife. But would he consent to exile without her ? Desmond thought he would not. He would hang on, play fast and loose with his benefactress, take all the money he could get from her, and employ every subterfuge to delay departure.

There had never been anything approaching friendship between these young men, for Randolph had come to Lorriford prepared to hate his grand-mother's hanger-on. That was the best word he could find for him. A hanger-on, an adventurer who meant to get to the blind side of a foolish old woman, who had indeed got to the blind

side already, and who was altogether adverse to Randolph's interest. He would marry that feather-headed minx, Muriel, who was obviously in love with him. Randolph had made up his mind about his sister's feelings before he appeared on the scene. Three or four of her letters, in which Desmond's name was conspicuous, were enough to reveal the secret of a girl's day-dream.

There could be no doubt in Randolph's mind as to Desmond's purpose. He had already succeeded in making himself indispensable to Mrs. Warden. He would wait till he was thoroughly established in her favour, before he declared himself as Muriel's lover ; and in the meantime he was pursuing a policy of Machiavelian depth, and strengthening his position by the very means which might be supposed to weaken it.

Randolph had studied the interloper quite as carefully as the interloper had studied him ; and he had observed Desmond's avoidance of Muriel's society. Mrs. Warden obviously liked his company, and gave him every opportunity for intimacy, and had even seemed offended at his preferring the solitude of his river-side lodgings to the family circle at Lorrington. Muriel's feelings on the subject were transparent to the brother's eye ; and he saw in Desmond's aloofness the evidence of a deep-laid plan.

A shallower schemer would have followed up his advantages eagerly, would have snatched every opportunity of being in the girl's society, and would have brought matters to a crisis, perhaps too soon for success, would have been hurried into a declaration before the psychological moment had arrived, would have been rejected indignantly by the guardian grandmother, and dismissed in disgrace.

But holding himself aloof, this clever schemer had strengthened the foolish girl's infatuation. He had

given himself the charm of the unattainable, had stamped himself as of a different species from the young men of the neighbourhood, whose commonplace attentions only bored her, and whose calf-love only provoked her sense of the ridiculous. Those might worship her, the well-born, the eligible, the altogether satisfactory ; but it was the inscrutable, the cold, the distant adventurer, with neither friends nor fortune, the man from nowhere, who held sway over the undisciplined emotions of inexperienced girlhood.

Randolph told himself that the secretary was playing a careful and crafty game, and that if something did not happen to change the position of affairs the grandson would go to the wall. If Desmond were to succeed in marrying Muriel, with her grandmother's consent, his fortune would be assured, and any bad luck of Randolph's—otherwise bad conduct—might result in his being disinherited in favour of the intruder. An old woman's promise was a poor thing to count upon ; above all when the promise was contingent upon good behaviour, and might be revoked at any moment.

And now this man from nowhere had dared to turn spy, and had possessed himself of facts that he might use to Randolph's disadvantage. What did he mean when he talked of danger to Mrs. Warden ? Danger ! A horrible word ! But it could mean very little in that connection. The danger of her grandson's association with a woman of somewhat unscrupulous character, unscrupulous at least in the use of money, though a very good sort, and gifted with beauty that might make the wisest of mankind her slave. Randolph was not ashamed of adoring her. There seemed something grand in a passion that would hazard everything, sacrifice everything for the beloved. He could laugh at his sister's infatuation for the man her fancy had idealized ; but he saw nothing but nobility in his

own attachment to a woman whose antecedents he dared not inquire into.

The lady's past history, except that she had once been Mrs. Farrowgate, the young wife of a City man whose firm had gone smash, was dark to him. For the present he knew that she had admirers, and he knew of one low-born adorer, twice millionaire, who would, in her own idiomatic phrase, give his eyes to make her his wife. He had tempted her with motor-cars, diamonds, and a flat on Hay Hill ; but she had so far been adamant. He was too ugly. Randolph did not know what might happen in a financial crisis, her furniture confiscated, herself houseless, and he unable to help her. Under such pressure, the Beast, as she always called him, might have a chance. He was a shrewd and long-headed Beast, and though he offered to shower his gold upon her, were she once his wife, or to make a magnificent marriage-settlement, he would do nothing to help her while she kept him at arm's length. He was willing to condone all the stormy passages of her past, willing to admit that she had been more sinned against than sinning.

" All you've got to do, my lass, is to make a clean slate, and cut every one of your old pals," he said. " When you're my wife, you mustn't reckernise 'em when you meet 'em in the street. Hold your head high. You'll be able to buy up the best of 'em, man, woman, or child. I'll give you diamonds that'll make the nobs want to know who you are, when they see you in your opera box."

It all sounded very good to the woman who lived in fear of the brokers, and the key of the street ; but it meant going through life with one of the ugliest and most repulsive men in London for her husband and companion, her gaoler even, for he had let her know that he would be desperately jealous.

" I've never been any man's bond-slave," she told

him, " and I couldn't stand slavery, not if my chains were strings of diamonds."

" Marriage ain't slavery," protested the Beast.

" It's a pretty good imitation. Do you think I ever envied Esther when the great King married her ? Not much. I knew what she'd have to put up with. Give me my crust of bread and liberty."

" Your crust of bread costs a goodish bit," said the millionaire, who in the early days of his infatuation, before he had contemplated marriage, had not refused a cheque to a lady in difficulties.

The knowledge of this man's dazzling offers, and that at some desperate moment Belle Farrowgate might accept him, as a lesser evil than penury, was a source of torment for Randolph. The greater part of the money that his grandmother had given him within the last two years had gone to this daughter of the horse-leech, and the cry still was " Give ! "

## CHAPTER XIII.

CHRISTMAS was approaching, and there were great preparations at Lorringford—preparations which chiefly concerned the humbler members of society. There was to be a dance for the élite towards the end of January ; but for the Christmas season, the time of friendly feeling and the ignoring of class distinctions, the gaieties were for the sons of toil, for the house-mothers and for the school-children, for servants and their belongings. There was to be a dinner for the old people ; a show of moving pictures and a supper for the middle-aged ; a Christmas tree and a conjurer for the children : and finally a servants' ball on New Year's Eve, to which the smaller fry among the Lorringford trades-people, and their young men and maidens, were bidden.

Desmond threw himself into the task of preparation for these festivities with as much ardour and as much skill as if he had been born and reared in the country-squire atmosphere, where such things are a matter of course, which argued well for his intelligence, since no such entertainments had ever come into his father's scheme of life. Lavish hospitality to his friends and acquaintances had been natural to Henry Desmond ; but beyond handsome tips to his servants and a ready response to the demands of local charities, he had taken no part in parochial rejoicings. He had always been

the Londoner in the country, the man of business who liked rural surroundings, but whose heart was in the mart of nations.

Mrs. Warden's secretary interested himself in every detail of the various entertainments. He engaged the conjurer, and chose the magic lantern, which was to be hired from a very superior firm in London. He planned the scheme of the fireworks, and wrote all the necessary orders, taking infinite pains against those aggravating mistakes which are apt to occur in the best regulated business. He went with Muriel to Windsor to buy toys for the Christmas tree; he interested himself even in crackers, and he gave the gardeners no peace till they produced a fir tree of the exact shape and size that he required.

Vera Penroyal gave a helping hand in all these preparations. Sir Emanuel's idea of Christmas was restricted to two services at St. George's Chapel, and a quiet dinner with two learned friends, whose interest had gone so deeply into the Drift that there was very little left for the trivial affairs of the modern earth; so Vera was free to spend a good deal of her leisure at Lorriford, and her brother, who was scientific, but not unpleasantly so, generally accompanied her.

Muriel had spent a fortnight where she went for a week; and she had come back from Windsor very much brighter looking than when she left home, carrying her broken heart and all her best frocks with her. Broken hearts heal quickly at seventeen, and life soon ceases to be empty of joy, especially if there are plenty of new frocks to fill the void; and although it would be too much to say that Muriel came back, after three dances and a good deal of attention from new acquaintances, absolutely heart-whole, she had at least called upon her womanly pride and her common-sense, and she was able to meet Desmond with a manner that gave

no evidence of blighted hopes or a heart that had loved in vain.

Among other new friends, she had become acquainted with Leonard Penroyal, who was tall, good-looking, and, according to his sister Vera, a person of exceptional abilities. His chief gifts lay in the region of science, and were as remote from Muriel's ken as if he were an undergraduate in a University in Saturn: but she was satisfied to take these gifts on trust, and she regarded him with awe, and could sympathize with Sir Emanuel's pride in a son about whom such fine things had been said by men of mark in the scientific world.

He had written science papers at four-and-twenty which gave the promise of a brilliant career, and he was withal popular in more than one set at the 'Varsity, and had not come off second best either on the river or in the cricket field. Muriel felt herself honoured when he talked to her, and prepared her grandmother for the appearance of a new light when he came to Lorringford.

"Grandfather would have appreciated him," she said, "but I'm afraid he'll be rather thrown away upon us."

"I don't think so, Muriel. People are not quite as ignorant as they used to be when everything in the way of science seemed a thing apart, something that it was no use trying to understand. We have all read a little, and have learnt to take an intelligent interest in out-of-the-way things. We all want to know about everything."

It was a surprise to Muriel when Randolph announced his departure from Lorringford, four days before Christmas.

"You don't mean that you are going to leave Lorringford now, after staying here nearly three months?" she exclaimed indignantly. "It will be hardly civil to Grannie, to leave her at Christmas time."

"I suppose it would be hardly civil to the Governor if I were not to spend Christmas Day at home."

"After the things you have told me about my father, and the stepmother, I shouldn't think he'd care much whether you are there or not. He's not the kind of man to consider Christmas a sacred season, as Grannie does. I'm sure she'll think it rather horrid of you to go away just when you might be useful to help in the entertaining."

"School-children—and old women, and village gaffers smelling of a straw yard. That kind of company ain't in my line."

"There will be other company."

"I know! The Vicar and his wife, and the Curate."

"There will be Vera."

"Vera doesn't care twopence for me, and never will. Vera has flung her young affections where you threw yours. I should have no chance against the scribbling man."

"What nonsense!"

"Is it? Of course that isn't his game. You're the prize he wants to pull off. He knows how weak my grandmother is about him; and he's only waiting to make sure of her, before he asks you to marry him. That's his little game."

Muriel's fair young face flushed crimson with anger.

"How dare you say such things? So unjust, so absolutely untrue! He is no schemer. If he wanted to marry me he would have pretended to care for me—and he never has. He has been almost rude in showing his utter indifference."

"I know! The Petruchio dodge. That's the kind of lover girls like. The more bearish a fellow is the more a romantic young simpleton admires him. And when he does melt he's irresistible—a

Vesuvius of a lover, and sweeps every obstacle before him. I know!"

" You don't know. You are egregiously wrong. You must have a bad nature, Randolph, to think evil of a man whose industrious, honourable life lies open before all the world. We have known him nearly half a year, Grannie and I ; and we have never discovered one unworthy feeling—one false note in his actions or in his conversation. And—perhaps I ought not to tell you—but I must—in order to let you see how far your suspicions are from the truth. He has told me, in confidence, that he is deeply in love with a girl who did him some great service years ago. I think she must have saved his life—or perhaps nursed him through a fever. It must have been something very serious, from the way in which he spoke of her. And he loves her, and only her ; and he hopes some day to win her ; and it is very horrid of you to say the things you have said ; and you have made me almost hate you."

A burst of hysterical sobbing ended the girl's protest. She was on fire with indignation, with ardour in her defence of the man she had loved, and who had given her nothing for her love, had rather gone out of his way to let her see that it was not wanted.

" I suppose you forget that he saved Grannie's life," she said, when she had grown calmer.

" I haven't forgotten your eight-page letter about it : but as Grannie's ducking happened close to the lock-house, somebody else would have fished her out if Desmond hadn't. It was a grand chance for him, and he has made the most of it."

" It was a grand chance for us when Grannie found a clever indefatigable secretary to keep everything straight for her ; or she might have gone on making bad investments, and subscribing to swindling charities, in her dear impulsive way,

till she had lost all her money. He has opened her eyes, and made her almost a woman of business."

"Well, whatever he has told you about the other girl, I can see that you are still infatuated."

"I am not infatuated. I have never been infatuated. But I admire his genius, and I respect him. I hope he will be my true and loyal friend all the days of my life, and that when he marries his wife will give me her friendship."

Muriel said this with a certain dignity that impressed her brother. He was perplexed by Desmond's line of conduct. Being accustomed to look at every move on the chess-board of life from the point of view of self-interest, he could not understand a penniless adventurer throwing away such a chance as a marriage with Muriel. The girl was pretty and attractive, young enough and romantic enough to be the slave of the man she loved. It was altogether a chance in a thousand ; and that Desmond could fling away his luck on account of some previous attachment seemed hardly possible.

"He's playing a deeper game than I can understand."

That was Randolph's final judgment of the case.

Nothing that Muriel could say, nor even his grandmother's evident wish that he should keep Christmas at Lorringford, prevailed against the stern necessity that called him to London.

"My father makes such a point of the Christmas dinner," he said. "But I shall come back early in the New Year, if you'll have me, Grannie."

"Of course I shall be glad to have you. It is better for you here than in London while you have nothing to do. I want you to go to Rhodesia in the spring ; and then you'll have an African winter to brace you before you come in for their hot weather."

"I believe I shall be ready," he said ; "I've been

thinking over things, and I want to do just what you wish."

"And I want you to work with all your heart, and to win a handsome reward for your work, as your grandfather did," answered Mrs. Warden.

Randolph shivered inwardly at his grandfather's name, which always came to him coupled with disagreeable things, hard work, steady habits, roughing it in very rough places, the strenuous life which brings a tardy fortune, too late for enjoyment.

He breathed more freely when he had left Lorringford and was pacing the platform at Penlow station. He had several reasons for wanting to be in London during the next week or two. In the first place *she* would be there; and she had asked him to spend Christmas Day with her.

"We won't dine at my place," she said, "for the cooking is execrable, and I couldn't stand roast beef and plum pudding if it was ever so good. You shall take me to our pet restaurant, and we'll have a *tête-à-tête* dinner. The Beast wants me to give a party at the Mastodon—the big new hotel, you know—and to ask ten of his City friends, and as many of my own particular pals. It would be a smart thing; for when it comes to a dinner to his own set the more it costs him the better he likes it. He loves to take out his note-case at the table, when the waiter brings the bill, and to make the new bank-notes rustle as he counts them. That's the sort of man he is; and I suppose I'm a fool for snubbing him. But I told him I had to dine with my old governess, and he must give his party without me; and he swore he'd put it off till I could boss the show; which was rather decent of him, you must admit."

This promise of a Christmas dinner with Belle was a magnet strong enough to draw Randolph to London; and then he had a feverish desire to be away from Lorringford at the season of peace and good-

will, of family affection, and the effusiveness of people who cherished the old-fashioned idea of the season, as a time when the members of a family should love each other better than usual, and when anything like bad feeling was to melt away in the atmosphere of Divine beneficence, or at any rate to be put on one side till the second week in January.

There would be many church services, services at which he would be constrained to assist, although he had generally managed to shirk the Sunday church-going, or at most had gone with Muriel in the evening, when he could sleep through the sermon unremarked in the darkness of the nave, made darker by the lamps on each side of the pulpit. The idea of the old-fashioned Christmas scared him. So much prating about kindness and goodwill, the duties of the rich to the poor, of sins confessed and absolved, the season when every knee must bend at the steps of the altar, when to avoid the Christmas Communion would mark him as a man of sin.

“I couldn’t stick it,” he said to himself, and he breathed more freely when he was in the train for London.

Although offended at his departure, Mrs. Warden had not withheld her Christmas present of a cheque for fifty pounds. To Randolph, who was urged to find nearly four hundred, the gift was of little account; but he tried to seem grateful.

## CHAPTER XIV.

MURIEL thought long and seriously of what her brother had said about Vera and Desmond. Could it be that Vera was the woman he loved, the woman who had done him some great kindness, something for which a life of devotion would not be too great a payment? Could it be Vera? If it were so what secrecy, what craft! They had met as strangers at Mrs. Tranmore's party. She had seen their meeting. There was no recognizing look on either side. Was she that woman, the world's one woman for George Desmond? Muriel wanted to know; but the old pain, the pain she had suffered in those first days after Desmond's confession, the sense of an aching void where her heart used to be, the feeling that life was done, well, *that* was somewhat deadened.

Her eighteenth birthday was early in the New Year; and she had begun to think of herself as older and wiser than the romantic girl whose heart had gone out unawares to the man who saved her from a terrible tragedy, and whom her passion of gratitude had made almost a demi-god. That he was a genius she still believed. Never could she doubt his superiority over every writer of the age she lived in. Equals he might have had in the great spirits of the past, but among the living she would admit of no equal.

She discussed him with Leonard Penroyal, who

remembered his articles in the *Orb*, and admitted a certain distinction, a subtle something on the border line of genius.

"The fellow has read a good deal," he said. "His style has the charm of allusiveness; and he doesn't overdo it, as some of your allusive chaps do; fellows whose writing is like a plate of sandwiches with the meat all provided by the giants of old, and only the bread and butter their own finding."

On her first acquaintance with Leonard, who came down from Oxford while she was at Foxcopse, Muriel had talked of Desmond with a fervour which it was impossible for a shrewd young Oxonian to misunderstand. He asked his sister if this dainty little thing was engaged to her grandmother's secretary. Vera thought not. Mr. Desmond had come to her assistance in a terrible crisis, when Mrs. Warden was drowning; and Muriel had perhaps an exaggerated idea of her debt of gratitude.

"She is such a child," Vera said, with the calm superiority of two-and-twenty.

Leonard found his way to Lorringford in the busy time of Christmas preparations, and once having appeared there soon established himself on the most friendly footing. He was charmed with the place, and with its kindly mistress, and Mrs. Warden thought him the nicest young man she had ever known, except her secretary. His cycle was to be seen speeding along the avenue nearly every morning, and he was second only to Desmond in usefulness, and indeed in one feature of the various entertainments he surpassed Desmond, as it was at his suggesting that they were to act a little play for the entertainment that was to be given in the parish room, a really fine building adjoining the Vicarage gardens.

Leonard had chosen *Delicate Ground* for the

little play, not so much because it was suitable to the rural audience as because he had made a success at Oxford in the leading character, and because he thought "the dainty little thing" peculiarly adapted to the part of the mutinous young wife, with her childish petulance and childish gullibility.

"Some of the allusions may be over the heads of the farm people," he said. "They can't be expected to know much about the French Revolution—but there's plenty of fun in the situation between Citizen Sangfroid and his young wife. They'll all understand *that*. And we must gag a bit, and work up the comic business. Don't you be afraid, Mrs. Warden, we'll make it go," concluded Leonard, with the happy assurance of the amateur, whose supreme idea of dramatic art consists in making a scene "go," to whatever degraded depths he may sink the original idea of the play.

A mixed entertainment was to precede *Delicate Ground*. There had been a question of the play coming first; but Leonard assured the Vicar and Mrs. Warden that after the brilliancy and vivid life of the play everything else would seem dead and dull.

"No, no, we must begin with the variety show," he said. "Your Curate's reading, for instance. Do you think they'd stand the 'Dream of St. Gerontius' after a roaring comedy? And the songs and duets: and Vera and Desmond must do the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet*."

Desmond started at the suggestion, and flashed a glance at Vera to see how she took it.

"*Romeo and Juliet* on a platform without scenery or dresses would be rather absurd," said Vera, "and I don't think the villagers would be interested."

"Oh, it wouldn't be acting: it would only be a recitation, and Miss Hammond could give you a little help on the piano—she would improvise, or play dreamy bits of Chopin or Rubinstein, just

to heighten the effect. If Desmond won't do Romeo, you can recite the poison speech, and act for dear life. They'd like that better, I daresay ; especially if you dress in a long white frock, and let your hair down."

Vera would not hear of the poison scene. She could not plunge head foremost into that depth of tragedy. She would have to live her life as Juliet before she could work herself up to Juliet's desperation. She would recite the balcony scene with Mr. Desmond, if he liked, but it would be very tame.

Desmond, with his brain on fire, agreed that it would be tame. The Vicar opined that it would be instructive and elevating.

"What opportunity have these poor souls of hearing Shakespeare ?" he questioned, as one not requiring an answer.

"Do you think they want Shakespeare ?" asked Mrs. Warden.

"We have to create the want, my dear Madam. When I was a curate in the north of England I elicited tumultuous applause by my reading of the battle scenes in *Henry the Fifth*—but the north country people are hyper-intelligent. I am afraid there is a bucolic dullness hereabouts that we shall hardly penetrate in a single evening—but if Miss Hammond and Mr. Desmond would help us we might have a weekly penny-reading until Lent, and we might hope for much good from such an enlightening influence."

"I'm sure I'm ready to do anything I can to amuse them," said Muriel eagerly, being greatly in need of amusement for herself.

She, and most of her surroundings, always talked of the village people vaguely, as "they" and "them."

"And if Miss Penroyal and her brother would give us a little assistance," pleaded the Vicar.

Vera would be glad to help occasionally if dear Mrs. Warden was not sick of seeing her at Lorringford. Leonard would vanish from these regions in the middle of January ; but until then he would read, recite, act, conjure, sing comic songs, or do anything that an inventive mind could suggest to enliven the evenings of Mr. and Mrs. Hodge, for whom the parish room, with its associations of tea and buns, Christmas trees, and jumble sales, occupied as large a place on the horizon of life as the opera in the thoughts of a musical fanatic.

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All the entertainments at Lorringford went off with éclat, and Mrs. Warden fully satisfied her yearning for an old-fashioned Christmas, while the Vicar's parochial entertainments, being supported and subsidized by the great house, were a marked advance upon the treats of former years. And in every one of these tomashas, as a young lady whose second cousin had just returned from Oude on furlough insisted upon calling the various festivities, Vera and Leonard had a hand. They came skimming over from Windsor on their bicycles, fresh and gay in the winter sunshine, and the sound of happy voices made the old house a place of gladness. Mrs. Warden delighted in young people, and was always ready to laugh at youthful jokes, or to interest herself in youthful schemes. The home rehearsals of *Delicate Ground*, which occupied every morning, with an occasional dress rehearsal in the evening, were followed by her with unflagging attention. She sat in her favourite chair in front of the actors, with the prompt book in her hand. She would not allow a syllable to pass that was not in the text ; nor the transposition of the most trivial phrase. She laughed at the jokes ; and had much ado not to weep at the least touch of pathos. She gave her

opinion of the acting very freely, corrected and advised her grand-daughter, and even made suggestions to Leonard, whose experience with the Oxford club placed him on a different level.

They had chosen the stupidest, most sheepish youth in the neighbourhood for Pauline's soft-headed lover ; and Mrs. Warden rejoiced with irrepressible laughter at the naïveté of the youth's rendering of a character in which he had only to be himself in order to equal Coquelin or Got.

Sumptuous meals were provided for actors and helpers of all kinds, that is to say, for all the idlers and busy-bodies in Mrs. Warden's circle, who ran in and out, putting a finger into every pie, and who, like the fly in the fable, thought their touch had set the whole machine moving. They were all made welcome. The luncheons were noisy and long ; and afternoon tea went on from half-past four till six.

Desmond in no wise neglected his secretarial duties during this season of strenuous frivolity ; yet Muriel could but observe that he no longer hurried back to the lock-house when his morning's work was done. He joined the revellers at luncheon, and only went away after the long-spun-out tea ; and he came back on the evening of the last dress-rehearsal, which was almost as important a function as the actual performance was likely to be.

He had given himself up to the sweetness of life. To be with Vera, in the easy-going intimacy of that pleasant house, to associate himself with her in all manner of trifling details, writing out lists of children, allotting presents, even weighing packets of tea, or labelling boxes of sweets, or in the more fatiguing preparation of the fairy tree, when he had to stand on a high step-ladder, and do wonders with tapers and tinsel ornaments—to be always near her, and sometimes her companion in a delicious

solitude of two, made up a sum of happiness that he could hardly enjoy and yet maintain the full use of his reason. He was afraid that in some whirlwind of emotion he would fall on his knees, and cover her hands with passionate kisses, and move her to laughter or disgust. Not yet must she know that he adored her ; not till he had something to offer, some rag of fame, some evidence of the world's esteem, some proof that the man she had saved was worth saving.

He was living in a fool's paradise, perhaps, in these days of bewildering delight ; but he had at least one cause for rejoicing, in the serious fact that there was no rival on the scene. He had studied Vera too deeply not to know that she was heart-whole, or that if there were any sensitive spot in her heart he alone had found it.

There were moments when upon the easy frankness of their companionship there fell a sudden cloud of seriousness and constraint, an unaccountable silence, perhaps only of moments, but a silence that brought a faint blush to Vera's cheeks, as if it were something to be ashamed of ; and in those moments Desmond's heart thrilled with a passionate hope that she was conscious of his love, and not displeased to know herself beloved by him.

Never had Christmas seemed to him so sacred, so solemn, so sweet, so joyous a season. Every string on the harp of life was sounded in that happy time. He gave himself up to the gladness of the passing hours. His novel was finished, and was in the printer's hands, to be published after Easter. His volume of essays was to appear at the beginning of the year. He was free to be as trivial as the rest of the party. He could not shut himself in his lodgings at such a time. He dined at Lorriford on Christmas Day, when everybody sat down to dinner exhausted by the labours of the afternoon and even-

ing, the old people's dinner and the young people's dance on Christmas Eve, the children's treat on Christmas Day.

Nobody would own to being tired, least of all Mrs. Warden, who vowed she had never enjoyed herself more, and who was gayest among the gay.

"I'm sorry poor Randolph is out of it all," she said, "but I daresay it was best for him to dine with his people."

Desmond was not sorry for Randolph's absence. The disappearance of that young man had taken something pernicious out of the atmosphere. It was as if a cloud of malaria had been swept away, leaving the air pure and sweet, after it had been tainted with some undefinable evil. In the very beginning of their acquaintance he had conceived an unreasoning aversion to Muriel's brother. It was like a physical antipathy, the feeling that some not unkind people have about cats. Randolph was handsome, altogether fine from a physical standpoint, but he produced a feeling of repulsion in Desmond which had never been caused by the afflicted and disgraced among his fellow men. Subtle, and not to be explained, the antipathy had grown with prolonged acquaintance; and, as the utter selfishness and self-indulgence of the young man were gradually revealed in the trivial details of every-day life, Desmond began to think that his repulsion might be one of those premonitions of evil to which sensitive natures are subject.

He had foreshadowed anxieties, disappointments, worries of all kinds, for Mrs. Warden from her grandson; and now that he knew him to be under the influence of Mrs. Farrowgate the prospect was darkened, and some serious trouble seemed inevitable.

## CHAPTER XV.

THE entertainment at the Parish Room took place on New Year's Eve, with distinguished success. The local magnates who patronized the show were in the front row of chairs ; the tradespeople, among whom appeared Mrs. Skeddles in a wonderful new gown, and Skeddles in liquor, filled a second row, and the peasantry crowded the wooden benches at the back. The gentilities were mildly pleased, and the villagers applauded with fervour, delighted with all that they could understand, and pleased with all that soared above them, as something which they felt to be of even more particular excellence.

Leonard kept his promise of making the play go, and converted the dainty little comedy into a screaming farce. Muriel's pretty face and figure, and short-waisted satin frock, *à la Directoire*, were much admired ; while the stupid youth achieved a wild success by looking and talking like his very self ; and the usual things about " born actors and actresses " and the pity of it that such talent should be lost to the world were said by the gentilities in the front row ; whereas Hodge and his friends perceived the weak spots in the performance and discussed the players with considerable acumen.

The balcony scene had appealed to a more elevated taste than was to be found even in the front row. Desmond and Vera spoke their words with a deep

feeling for the poetry, but with a subdued force that hardly satisfied Hodge. It was agreed that they both had good voices, and that the young lady was a stunner as to looks, but Hodge thought they might have put a bit more fire into it, and that they ought to have rushed into each other's arms at the end of the scene: also that when Romeo wished he had been a glove upon that hand that he might kiss that cheek, he ought actually to have kissed her.

Carriages had been ordered for eleven; but the performance was not over till a quarter to twelve, and the bell-ringers were already in the church tower when Vera and Desmond bade the Vicarage people good-night.

They had agreed to walk home, while the carriages waited for the performers in *Delicate Ground*, who had to exchange their stage clothes and paint and powder for the complexion and attire of common life. The carriage would have to make a long round by Penlow Bridge, so Vera and Desmond had more than enough time for their walk, and the crossing of the back-water. Peacock had been among the audience, and was taking his time with his village acquaintance, before going on to get the boat ready.

It was a lovely New Year's Eve, the air soft and beneficent as an evening in April, while the stars were dazzling, but not with the metallic brightness of a frosty night.

Vera had been staying at Lorringford since Christmas; but she was to go back to Foxcopse next morning with her brother, so that they might spend New Year's Day with Sir Emanuel, who had not bewailed himself about their absence at Christmas, yet might feel that he had some claim to their attention before the last suggestion of a festal season had vanished from the time.

"We are giving a dinner on Old Christmas Day to all my father's special cronies, and some really old

friends, who will be staying in the house. They are all learned people, paleontologists, ethnologists, and that kind of thing, and I am inviting my nicest girl friends to meet them, for I find the older and more learned they are the more they appreciate nice girls."

"It is the longing backward look at the youth they have let slip, while they were grubbing in the grave-yard of Time," said Desmond.

They had walked slowly in the mild air, and they walked in silence, when suddenly there came the clash of bells, with tumultuous rejoicing in the unknown future, a joy peal that to some sorrowful hearts comes with a sound of mockery.

"The year is born," said Desmond. "The undiscovered country lies before us. I was in London a year ago, in a shabby street on the South of the Thames ; and when I opened my window to let in the sound of the great bell tolling the death of the year, and the joy bells from twenty steeples drowning it, I had hardly a hope to light the untrodden road ; least of all the hope that I might be with you when the year died."

"It was very strange that we should meet, by the merest accident."

"My road of life seemed dark that night—not one cheering ray, not one promise of good. But there was one sweet memory, and I lived on that ; and then gradually, while I wrote for bread, the anonymous journalist's hand-to-mouth subsistence, there grew the ambition to do something better, and with ambition came hope ; the hope that some day, ever so far off in the dimness of unknown time, I should be able to seek you out, and make myself known to you as the man you saved, and who had made himself almost worthy of your esteem : the man you had first seen in his grey prison-clothes, branded, degraded, but not guilty. I wonder whether you believed me that night, when I told you I had been unjustly condemned ?"

"I wanted to believe you," she answered naïvely ; "I always wanted my convict to be innocent."

"And do you believe me now that we have been in each other's company in so many pleasant hours, now that I hope you have begun to think of me as a friend ?"

"I have always thought of you as a friend, since that night on the moor. I wanted you to do well in life, and I was more glad than I can say when I heard how successful you had been in your literary work, and how much you were liked and valued by Mrs. Warden and Muriel."

"And can you now believe that I was a victim and not a criminal ?"

"I know nothing of your story ; but I cannot think that with your cultivated mind, your love of all things good and beautiful, you could have ever been like those poor wretches in the prison, the hardened criminals, steeped in sin."

"I was never like them. I have shrunk from telling you my story because I cannot explain my position in the dock without saying hard things of my father, whom I loved, and whose part in a conspiracy of fraud is one of the mysteries of human life. The fall was so deep, that on looking back at the history of his crime it seems to me more like an aberration of the intellect than a deliberate act of the will. He is dead, and nothing I can tell you will do him harm ; but remembering what he was to me from my childhood till the day of his financial ruin I cannot think of him without tenderness and unspeakable regret. He was a man whom all men loved—generous, benevolent, open-handed and open-hearted. He died in a convict prison, broken in mind and body, in years that should have been the prime of his life."

They had walked past the landing-stage where Peacock was now waiting with the boat ; but the star-lit river, and the soft sweet air were an excuse

for lingering, and Vera was too deeply interested to be conscious of time.

" May I tell you all that there is to be told about myself and my misfortunes ? " he asked. " I should like to tell you, here in this quiet spot, under that exquisite sky. We have plenty of time, for Mrs. Warden will have to wait for Muriel and your brother."

" I want you to tell me," she said simply, whereupon, walking slowly along the riverside pathway, he told her the story of his life, his unconscious part in the carrying out of a stupendous fraud, and his condemnation, in spite of the suggestion of his possible innocence in the judge's charge to the jury.

" Does it all sound to you like a fairy tale ? " he asked when he had done, " or can you believe that it is the very truth ? "

" I believe that it is the very truth," she answered gravely.

" God bless you ! God bless us both in this sweet New Year," he said.

There was a passionate feeling in the voice, suppressed emotion that gave strength and significance to the words.

Just those brief sentences, and the way he drew her hand under his arm as they turned to go back to the landing-stage seemed almost like their betrothal.

They found the Vicar and his wife waiting to cross the water with them.

" Mrs. Warden insisted on our going to supper," explained the Vicar, " and though I never eat supper I know my wife would be sorry to lose the genial gathering, as indeed I myself should be."

" Were you taking a tiny stroll ? Lovely night, isn't it, for the beginning of January ? I'm afraid we shall have to pay for it later on," said the Vicar's wife.

" I was tempted to write to the *Times* this

morning, after finding three tufts of primroses in bloom on a southern bank in our orchard," said the Vicar, and, enlivened by this inspiriting talk, the skiff bore them to the Lorringford bank.

Other neighbours had been bidden, and the two round tables of eight in Mrs. Warden's dining-room were full.

" We shall have to wait upon ourselves," said the hostess, " for the servants have their own party. They were beginning Sir Roger as we came in. I hope you won't object to an indoor picnic."

Object ! Why it was the most delightful kind of entertainment.

Champagne corks volleyed, turkeys and tongues were carved on the table, pretty tiny kickshaws were handed by officious youths, and girls with *savoir faire* converted themselves into parlour maids, changed plates, brought knives and forks, and even filled glasses without spilling much wine.

Youth and good wine, lights, and cheery fires ! What more need there be to make a joyous party ? For two at least who happened somehow to be sitting side by side in the round of young people at Muriel's table, those first hours of the year were a time of ineffable happiness. No word of love had been spoken ; but in Desmond's history of his life there had been the note of a frank unsparing revelation that is given only to the beloved. He had offered himself to her, as it were, in that story, with all that he had known of joy, all that he had suffered of undeserved disgrace.

It was late when the supper party broke up, and the Vicar and his wife took leave, expressing their astonishment at their unwonted dissipation.

" It is not often we welcome the New Year so merrily," said the Vicar, " and I hope Mr. Peacock will not have been too merry among his friends in the servants' hall," whereupon Desmond offered to row them across the backwater, and bring the boat

back, an offer gladly accepted by Mrs. Lavington, who had a sad lack of confidence in her husband's powers, whether with a horse, a boat, or a gun.

Vera and her brother were to leave after an early breakfast, and there would be no excuse for Desmond seeing her in the morning, so in the general good-night he found time for a confidential word.

"Good-night," he said, and then in a lower voice, "Does good-night mean good-bye?"

"I hope not," she answered with sweet frankness.

The rippling water danced under the stars, and the stars themselves danced as he rowed the skiff to the village landing-place. He was not content to take his clerical passengers across the ferry, but rowed to the nearest point for the Vicarage, which was nearly half a mile farther, and then took the boat back, while his heart sang to the dancing light on the river. He felt sure of her now. So far from his misfortunes and disgrace standing in his light, they had awakened her interest, and filled her gentle heart with pity. He had profited by all the fond fancies of her childhood. He was her convict, the man she had saved; and to her romantic mind he was more precious than the most fortunate and the most admired among men. Without one spoken word they had given themselves to each other; and for her to accept another man's love, or for him to care for any other woman, would be as tremendous a treason as if the most specific vows had been exchanged. He was sure of her; and the business of his life henceforward would be to make himself worthy of her. Alas! the best he could hope was to distinguish himself with his pen, which seemed a poor and trivial renown beside the glory of brave deeds on the field of battle, or even the statesman's less heroic victories. The explorer, the man of science, the inventor, must all seem of a grander mould than the man who sits under the midnight

lamp weaving his dreams into stuff that can be sold in the book-market, so many pages of fervid imagination for so much coin, the upshot depending not upon the merit of the book, from the educated critic's standpoint, but upon whether, in the publisher's phrase, it "catches on."

Happily in his first novel Desmond had been lifted above the consideration of "catching on." The book was his shrine, his temple, where he worshipped the image of his beloved. The book was a living thing; not so much merchandise. He was surprised when a publisher of good standing made him an offer for his random papers in the *Orb*, and then, on hearing that he had just finished a novel, offered to produce that on advantageous terms. The articles in the *Orb* had been talked about in clubs where critics congregate, and the publisher, himself no mean judge, had read and admired them; and was willing to speculate in a romance from the same pen.

Vera and her brother vanished from the place which their presence had enlivened, and Mrs. Warden and Muriel found life somewhat sober and grey after the Christmas rejoicings, and the going and coming of frivolous youth. Happily there was the dance to look forward to at the end of the month, and Vera was to come back to Lorrington for a few days, in order to be on the spot for that event. There would be other staying company, friends from Hertfordshire, and the house would be full to over-flowing. In the meantime Muriel was to spend two nights at Foxcose to attend Windsor's most brilliant festivities—a public and a private ball.

Desmond found plenty of secretarial work at the beginning of the year. There were bills pouring in, bills from West-End shops, that had to be examined by Mrs. Warden, somewhat against the grain, as she wanted to leave everything to her secretary. He

had to remind her that he could not take upon himself to say how many pairs of gloves she and her grand-daughter might have got through since mid-summer, or whether the prices of frocks that to him seemed appalling, were at all in accordance with her memory of the sums named when the things were ordered.

“One can never get the creatures to name a definite price,” she complained. “It is always ‘about’ so much—or they cannot tell till they find how many yards of silk will be wanted—but it won’t be an expensive gown—and it will be best to leave everything to them, and then they know one will be pleased. Yes, certainly Muriel’s frocks are dear”—as he pointed to figures in the neatly written column, “just simple little frocks, Madame always calls them, suitable for a young lady who is hardly out of the schoolroom; and the boating frocks, just plain linen, with a little *broderie Anglaise*. Those are rather too bad at fifteen guineas apiece. Laura Danvers looked quite as nice in a frock she made at home, that cost her thirty shillings. I’m afraid these smart dress-makers impose upon one, and it does seem rather too bad, while there are board - school children starving.”

She could give him no help that could modify the dressmaker’s demands. He could only see that totals were correct, and write cheques for the fashionable harpies. The bills seemed endless, and he calculated roughly, after going through them, that it cost over five hundred a year to dress Muriel in the clothes in which she “ran about” at Lorrингford. What would it cost to dress her in London?

He wondered if Vera’s garments were as costly? He thought not, remembering the black frock and white pelerine in which he had first seen her, and a certain elegant simplicity in her toilet at Lorr-

ford. And what delight it would be for a husband to earn the price of those gracious garments with the congenial labour of the pen.

The subscriptions to hospitals and charitable institutions of all kinds were paid at this season, and an avalanche of appeals from unknown charities and philanthropic workers came pouring in at the beginning of the year, all making work for a conscientious secretary. Happily Mrs. Warden's income was large enough to maintain a more extravagant mode of life than that which satisfied all her desires. Her benefactions were on a much higher scale than her personal expenses. Her surplus income was mostly spent on charity ; and the wise bestowal of this money was the most serious question that Desmond had to consider, and arrange with her. It was hard to have to come between her and generous impulses that prompted her to relieve a pitiful case without stopping to inquire if the pitifulness were not the ingenious invention of the professional beggar. But he was relentless in his investigation of every appeal ; and he spared no trouble in discovering the people who were worthy of help, and in devising the best means of helping them. Everything that he did was carefully and solidly done, and the help given was of a permanent character.

The year was nearly a fortnight old when Randolph came back to Lorriford and announced his intention of remaining there till it was time for him to prepare for South Africa.

He told Mrs. Warden that his father and his father's wife were simply impossible ; and that he could not support another day under their roof.

"Their quarrels are detestable, and their reconciliations are disgusting," he said, "so I shall be very glad to put the ocean between them and me. I shall be quite ready for Rhodesia. Whatever it

may be like, it can't be worse than South Kensington, as I know it."

His grandmother was kind, and promised to provide his outfit and travelling expenses, and to place a little money to his credit in a bank at Cape Town. Muriel told him that he ought to consider himself fortunate, and that for her part, if Heaven had made her a man she would have loved a life of adventure in a romantic land.

"There's nothing romantic about Rhodesia, and it ain't a life of adventure to oversee niggers in a tobacco field," Randolph answered moodily. "If my grandmother cared twopence for me she would never have thought of sending me there. But she never did care twopence for me," he concluded, with a dark brow, and a kind of gloomy satisfaction.

"I can't make you out, Rannie. You talk to Grannie as if you were pleased and grateful for all her kindness, and then you say horrid things about her behind her back."

"Do you expect me to be pleased at being sent to the uttermost end of the earth, to toil among Kaffirs?"

"Then you shouldn't pretend to be pleased," said Muriel.

"Oh, one has to hold a candle to the devil."

"Randolph, can you compare my darling Grannie——"

Her brother flung himself out of the room, without stopping to hear her indignant protest.

The Lorringford dance was a success. Of course there was no room in the fine old house that was quite large enough for Muriel's idea of a ball-room; so a vast pavilion sprang up on the lawn to accommodate the dancers, while all the sitting-rooms were available for the middle-aged people who wanted to play Bridge, and the young people who wanted to flirt. It might be called a dance without chaperons,

for the mothers and aunts who had brought their girls were mostly to be found in the card-rooms.

The smoking-room and other apartments in the basement, including Desmond's den, were made into supper-rooms, and here talk was gayest, and laughter loudest, and the tide of life ran fast as a mill race.

Desmond had not danced since his undergraduate days, when the doctor's dark-eyed daughter had approved his step, and had scandalized three villages by the number of waltzes she gave him ; for the youth of the neighbourhood complained that even if they were supposed to be engaged it was not cricket to monopolize her for a whole evening. Other fellows had a right to have their chance. Even if she were his wife other chaps would want to dance with her.

For seven years the divine art had been unpractised by him, yet in his first waltz with Vera he felt as if he were gyrating in some celestial medium, so light were their footsteps, so exquisite the rhythm of their movements. He had been sure that she would excel, but had apprehended clumsiness and disuse in himself ; and now he might have been Mercury with winglets at his heels.

One waltz early in the evening, and one after supper. That was the most she could accord him. Her card had been nearly full before she left Windsor, where soldiers and civilians pleaded for advance booking.

"I kept those two for you," she said, "and one for Mr. Hammond. Poor young man ! How ill he looks ; and Muriel tells me he is going to South Africa in March."

"He will be better there than here," said Desmond.

"How coldly you speak of him. Perhaps you don't like him."

"Frankly, I don't like him ; and I'm very sorry not to be able to like Mrs. Warden's grandson,"

“ Then you will be glad when he is gone ? ”

“ Very glad—if ever that comes off.”

“ You don’t think he will go ? ”

“ I don’t believe he means to go, though he talks big about it.”

“ I’m afraid you’re prejudiced.”

It was late when they had their second waltz, and the ball-room had thinned, and the hooting of motors was heard as the people whose homeward journeys were longest began to vanish away. The three to six mile people could afford to stay later.

The last waltz was a good-night and good-bye dance, for Vera was going back to Foxcopse early next day, with her brother, who had come from Oxford for Muriel’s ball, and whose attentions during the evening had been sufficiently marked to dash the hopes of eligible youths and to disappoint their elders, who, in some desperate cases, were more keen on matrimonial views than the youths themselves.

“ You see the estate is so big, and wants thousands spent upon it, so Frank really ought to marry money,” said one fond mother to her tame cat.

“ With all those girls to provide for it is vital for Algy to make a good marriage,” said another anxious parent, to her *âme damnée*.

Muriel, floating round the ball-room, in a cloud of chiffon and lace, looked more like Titania than the money-bag which she represented in the eyes of manœuvring mothers.

She liked waltzing with Leonard Penroyal. It was wonderful that a science man should dance so well. She had fancied the two things incompatible. She was not in love with Leonard. Upon that point she was quite assured. Her feelings were miles and miles away from anything foolish or sentimental. Love had died in that first crushing disappointment. Never, never could any man be

to her what George Desmond had been. But she appreciated Leonard's attainments, and she was glad that he liked to talk to her. He was the only man who had interested her in the smallest degree since —since she had broken her heart. And she was touched at his having come from Oxford for her dance.

"It was a sacrifice," she told him, "for I know you adore Oxford."

"Perhaps there are other things I adore even more than the 'Varsity," he said, smiling down at her.

This was during a waltz, when a subject can be snapped off short, without troublesome explanations.

For Vera and Desmond there were no explanations, no words that told of love, only the deep delight of being together, the bliss that needs not speech, the perfect faith that can wait and be happy in waiting.

It was only a few days after the ball that a cloud fell upon Lorringford: a cloud so unexpected and so sudden that it produced a strange confused feeling of trouble in the whole household.

The house of gladness became a house of fear.

Mrs. Warden was ill. She who had not known what it was to have her energies impaired, her activity restricted, or her spirits damped, since those hardening health-giving days in Griqualand, she whose unfailing good health and youthful activity had been a theme for friends to expatiate upon, was stricken down with an illness for which her doctor was unable to find a name, or for which he found three or four different names in the course of three or four daily visits.

At the first visit he ascribed the *malaise* to indigestion, and opined that his patient would be well in a day or two. On his second appearance

he talked of a chill, that had caused a touch of fever, and wanted Mrs. Warden to take to her bed altogether.

This she peremptorily refused to do. She had no objection to stay upstairs, if he ordered her, but she would not lie in bed all day to please any doctor in Christendom. Her morning-room adjoined her bedroom; and she was willing to confine herself to those two rooms for a day or two.

"And if you can't cure me in a day or two I must beg you to get some London man down for a consultation," she said severely. "I can't consent to be ill. I have not been laid up with any kind of illness for nearly forty years. I can't allow myself to be made an invalid."

She looked at the doctor almost resentfully, as if he were to blame.

She made him feel very unhappy, and he came again late in the evening, when he was relieved to find her somewhat better.

"If the improvement continue—as I feel assured it will—you can go down to your drawing-room to-morrow," he said blandly.

"I mean to go down in any case," she answered. "I won't stand another day's imprisonment."

He smiled, and talked of the weather, and the news in an evening paper that he had bought at Penlow. Muriel was waiting for him in the hall, with an anxious countenance.

"Oh, I do hope she is better," she cried.

"Yes, she is decidedly better. There has been no return of the gastric symptoms."

"Dowland thought she was improved."

Dowland was the maid, an old servant. Dr. Wilmot's lip curled on being told Dowland's opinion. Lady's-maids had no right to opinions.

He regarded confidential body-servants, male or female, as a pernicious class, who opened windows, and gave the patient forbidden things to eat and

drink. Creatures full of old women's heresies, who believed that if sick people wanted a thing it would be sure to agree with them.

"If Dowland will follow my instructions rigidly, and take nothing upon herself, I have every hope the improvement will be maintained," he said as he took leave.

Desmond had come from the lock-house at ten o'clock to hear the result of the doctor's evening visit. He was in the billiard-room with Randolph, who seemed even more anxious than his sister; and they both came into the hall as the doctor's carriage drove away.

"Well?" asked Randolph.

Muriel told them what the doctor said.

"Hurrah," cried Randolph, "I knew she'd soon pick up."

"Did he tell you the cause of her illness?" Desmond asked.

"He told us that this morning. It was a chill," said Randolph.

"When in doubt say a chill. I believe that is one of the family practitioner's precepts. If I were you, Miss Hammond, I would send for the best all-round physician in London. If there is to be a consultation it's just as well to have it early in the case."

"You are making a mountain out of a mole-hill, Desmond," said Randolph. "Grannie will be up and about to-morrow. You hear what Wilmot said."

"Then the second opinion may not be wanted."

"Of course we'll have a consultation," said Muriel. "You can't believe that I would neglect my dearest Grannie. If she doesn't come down to the drawing-room to-morrow, I'll make Dr. Wilmot send for the cleverest man in London."

Happily the local practitioner was justified in his forecast, and on the following morning Mrs. Warden

was decidedly better. She reappeared in her drawing-room. She read the papers. But there were still symptoms of indisposition such as she had not known for forty years, and she grumbled a good deal.

"I don't understand being ill," she told Desmond ; "as to Dr. Wilmot's idea of a chill, that's absolute nonsense. I couldn't have a severe chill without feeling cold ; and I never felt cold till after I began to be ill."

After this day recovery was rapid, and Mrs. Warden was able to resume her usual way of life, to walk in her gardens, a shade weaker at first, but speedily recovering her strength, to drive in an open carriage, to entertain her friends, and keep her visiting engagements, and to go to church. Muriel was happy again, and ran about with her old dancing step, and played and sang, and filled the house with sound, as any healthy high-spirited girl of eighteen can, even without the assistance of another girl.

Life went on happily for two or three weeks. Desmond's volume of essays, "Life and Time," was published, and attracted immediate attention. All the best of the critics praised him. He was allowed that saving grace of "distinction," the something undefinable which no critic has ever taken the trouble to analyse, but without which books are despised by the superior critic and accounted "not literature." Desmond's book was accepted as literature. It was not the mechanical work of a man who writes for bread alone, and whose pages bristle with hackneyed phrases and stale allusions. He had written to please himself, had striven hard to satisfy his own yearnings for the ideal ; and he had his reward in pleasing a rather wide public, for his touch was light, and the gaiety of heart that Fate had spoilt for him in actual life, found itself in his book.

Not yet could he announce himself to Sir Emanuel Penroyal as a suppliant for his daughter's hand. Before he could so offer himself he must be justified by a literary success that would promise permanent income, subject only to the chances of sickness or evil fate. All that he had ever learnt of the literary life, had shown him that a position in the front, or even in the second, rank of novelists might assure the successful writer of an income. The author who had once found favour with the reading public needed only the capacity for steadfast work, the literary conscience, and an ardent love of his art. His fortunes perhaps might fluctuate, but his readers were not likely to forsake him, so long as he had something to tell them that no one else could tell, his own story of life, coloured through and through with his own individuality.

Until Desmond could submit his claims to Vera's father, he made himself adamant against the temptation of impassioned moments when the chance of being alone with his beloved girl sent the young blood racing through his veins, and constrained him to an awkward silence, since speech was impossible, if he was not to tell her of his love.

He was master of himself in such moments, though they were many in the family life at Lorriford, where no week passed without some visit from Vera. He looked back to that magical hour on St. Sylvester's night, and hope was strong. Yet it would be a hard matter to win Sir Emanuel's consent to his daughter's marriage with a convicted felon ; and from his knowledge of Vera's character, he feared that the story of Dartmoor Prison would have to be told.

He had not seen Vera's father since the night of Mrs. Stanmore's party ; but he had heard a good deal about him from his daughter, and from Muriel, and he gathered that he was a man of easy temper, whose ideas and prepossessions worked in a narrow

groove, and that of all men he might be the most likely to overlook difficulties, and to take a sanguine view of a prospective son-in-law's circumstances. But the word felon—the trial, the sentence, the five years in a penal settlement ! Not often had a lover such obstacles to overcome.

“ He may stop me before I have got to the end of my story, and order me out of his house,” thought Desmond, in one of his more dejected moods.

And then he wondered what Vera would do if she were forbidden to marry him. Would she take the law into her own hands like Desdemona, and walk out of her pleasant home, forsake father and brother, and trust her life and her life's happiness to him ? Would she think the world—her world of respectability and parental love—well lost for him ; and would she be content with his love, till time softened her father's heart, and brought forgiveness and peace ?

He comforted himself with the hope that she would act as Desdemona acted, that love would prevail even over duty. He greatly doubted whether he could win her from her father—except by a suppression of the truth that would be hateful to her. But he thought that if her father were obdurate he could win her from herself, and that she would come to him as the dove comes to her mate.

## CHAPTER XVI.

EVERYBODY was happy at Lorringford, and Desmond's book, in a gay green and gold cover, was to be seen upon all the tables, Mrs. Warden having ordered a dozen copies, so that she might have one in every room she sat in, and an odd volume to give to a friend. Everybody was, or seemed to be, happy, for even Randolph displayed an unwonted cheerfulness, and had lost the hang-dog manner that his grandmother disliked. He had been especially attentive to her since her illness, and talked of Rhodesian tobacco fields as if they were the desire of his heart.

Desmond, who knew more than other people knew about him, somewhat suspected this transformation, and feared a lurking evil under the forced gaiety. Perhaps a deep design upon his grandmother's purse, to get a liberal cheque from her before he left England, enough to induce Mrs. Farrowgate to go as far as Cape Town with him, if no farther. Since the war, Cape Town had been the fashion, and if the conditions were sufficiently luxurious, Mrs. Farrowgate might take pity on her slave, and smile upon the preliminary stages of his exile.

Desmond could not help watching this young man ; yet he told himself that Mrs. Warden could afford to be victimized, and that a thousand or two more or less did not inatter. The pity of it was Randolph's association with an unprincipled woman, and the inevitable descent from bad to worse.

There could be no hope for him while he remained under the influence of Mrs. Farrowgate ; and two journeys to London in the space of ten days suggested that he was still in the toils.

There had been no more rough words between the two men after Randolph's return to Lorringford. He entirely ignored their quarrel at Penlow station ; and he was a shade more civil to the secretary than he had been before that brief encounter. It might be that he was grateful for his enemy's reticence, when he found from his grandmother's conversation that she had been told nothing to his discredit. He knew her frank and open character well enough to be sure that if she had heard of Mrs. Farrowgate she would not have been slow to lecture him upon his folly, and even to shut up her cheque book, with a holy horror of his grandfather's virtuous money falling into Delilah's lap.

She had said nothing, and he knew that so far he was safe ; so he made himself agreeable to Desmond, on his accustomed policy of holding a candle to the devil.

All things had been bright and gay at Lorringford for more than a fortnight, and Mrs. Warden had almost forgotten her brief but somewhat severe indisposition, when a sudden recurrence of her malady filled Muriel with apprehension and the patient with something like despair.

" If I am to have a chronic complaint, I had much better be dead," she told Desmond, who in her illness seemed to her almost as a son. " I couldn't go on for years like this—well one day and ailing the next. I was never in better health than yesterday. You remember our long walk by the river. Muriel was tired before I was. And to-day I am a wreck."

She was lying on a sofa in her morning-room, hopelessly ill. This time Dr. Wilmot had no hesitation in pronouncing an opinion. She was suffering

from the new form of influenza. He had read the description of it in the *Lancet* the week before last, and had been looking for it ever since. This was a most interesting case, the symptoms being all he could expect. Evidently the new influenza! He found it difficult to hide his satisfaction at finding such a strongly marked example of the new malady.

"I was afraid that we should have it among us," he said.

"Is it dangerous?" Muriel asked, with fear and trembling.

"No, not dangerous, except when there are complications. The sequelæ of influenza have to be guarded against; but with proper care there can be no danger. Mrs. Warden's maid really seems a good nurse."

"She has had no experience," said Muriel. "She has been nearly twenty years with Grannie, and Grannie has never been ill."

"But she tells me she nursed you in several childish maladies."

"Mumps, measles, chicken-pox—trumpery illnesses. Surely we ought to have a trained nurse for Grannie."

"I ventured to suggest as much," replied the doctor, "but Mrs. Warden refused—with an amount of feeling which made me shrink from insisting. There is nothing of a difficult nature in the case. Mrs. Dowland has only to follow my instructions. She appears intelligent."

"She is as clever as she can stick. And how long is this hateful influenza likely to last?"

"I fear—from my knowledge of the new form—that we are in for a fortnight's illness, even under the happiest conditions."

And then Muriel, with some hesitation, begged the doctor to summon a consultant, to fortify himself with a second opinion.

"I know how clever you are," she said, fearful of

wounding his professional pride, and so making him less well-disposed towards the patient.

He assured her that the case presented no difficulties, and that there was no need of a consultation, but that if it would be any satisfaction to her, he would be happy to meet, for choice, Sir Julius Martley, quite the biggest man of his day.

"It would be a satisfaction," Muriel said eagerly. "Pray send for Sir Julius Martley. I should like her to have twenty doctors, rather than risk the possibility of something not being done that ought to be done. I have heard of famous doctors overlooking symptoms. You don't know how I love her. You can't imagine what a precious life hers is."

Dr. Wilmot assured her of his sympathy. He was kind and soothing, and promised to telephone to Sir Julius from Penlow on his way home.

When he came in the evening Dr. Wilmot told Muriel that messages had been flying backwards and forwards. Sir Julius had been hurriedly summoned to a patient in the west of England; but he was to be in Harley Street that night, and he would come to Lorringford to-morrow evening, between six and seven.

"It will be dark," said Muriel. "Wouldn't it be better for him to see her in the daylight?"

"There will be plenty of light for him to make his diagnosis. A farthing candle would be enough. He is a man of unerring judgment."

"Yes, I am sure of that. Only people look different in the cruel searching daylight—especially old people. And Grannie seems so much worse in the morning. I should like him to see her early in the day."

"With his engagements that would be impossible. His waiting-room is crowded from ten till two, when he snatches a hasty luncheon before driving all

over London. He is one of the doctors whom everybody wants."

Dr. Wilmot came back to the drawing-room with a cheerful countenance. His patient was a little better. It was one of the distinguishing marks of the new influenza that the patient should pick up in the evening.

Desmond came into the hall to hear the doctor's opinion. He had spent his evenings at Lorringford during Mrs. Warden's illness. He walked over from the lock-house after dinner, and stayed till eleven or later. Muriel was low-spirited, and seemed to want moral support, something more than her brother could supply.

He sat with Muriel and Randolph in the billiard-room, where there were book-shelves and comfortable easy chairs. But there was no question of billiards, dearly as Muriel loved the game. The cover had not been taken off the table since Mrs. Warden began to be ill again, nor had a piano been opened in any of the rooms.

There was hardly any conversation, for Muriel could only think or talk of the care that lay like a leaden weight upon her heart. There was no use in Randolph telling her that she was a fool, that there was nothing serious the matter with Grannie.

"She has never been ill before, and she seems to have begun badly. It is four days since her relapse. She is a little better every night, and much worse every morning ; and if she goes on like that, how is it to end ?" Muriel asked despairingly.

"Why it will end in her getting well, I hope. She could hardly expect to escape influenza when every mortal one knows has been knocked down by it some time or other," Randolph said.

"I have never had influenza," said Muriel.

"*Unberufen.* You're not of age for it yet, perhaps. You'd better not hang about Grannie too much, if you don't want to get it,"

Muriel treated this warning with disdain. She had been sitting with the patient nearly all day, and had only left her in the evening because Dowland thought she would sleep better if there was no one but her maid in the room. The hours were longer downstairs than in the sick-room, for there was the gnawing anxiety that could not be satisfied by the sight of the patient. Muriel ran upstairs a dozen times in an hour, and listened at the bedroom door, afraid to open it lest she should disturb the healing slumber. Between whiles she sat by the billiard-room fire, and pretended to read a book, and Randolph sat opposite with his face hidden behind a newspaper. Desmond wondered that he could support these long dull evenings, and wondered greatly that he did not take advantage of his grandmother's illness, and go up to London. That monstrous metropolis of noisy pleasure was so near, and life at Lorringford was so melancholy. Perhaps after all there was more good in the young man than Desmond had been willing to believe, and he might be really anxious about his grandmother. Really anxious? Anxious for her recovery? Could that be, when he knew that she had left him half her fortune, and that her death would make him a rich man, and give him the desire of his heart; since it was not likely that Belle Farrowgate would refuse to marry a good-looking young man with half a million.

The half million would make all the difference. That was the secret care behind Randolph's haggard countenance. It was not the anxiety of an affectionate grandson. It was the racking uncertainty of a man whose fate trembled in the balance, and for whom the hand of death would open the gate of the profligate's Paradise, the possession of the woman his trivial soul had chosen for its mate.

Desmond, who was deeply impressed with the idea of this young man's worthlessness, could not

credit him with affection strong enough to subjugate self-interest.

Those were painful hours in the silent house, where the servants moved with slow and careful footsteps, and spoke to each other with hushed voices. There had been no word spoken of danger, but the change from Mrs. Warden's splendid vitality to a state of prostration was enough to fill the household with vague apprehensions. It was what perhaps must be considered an old-fashioned household, a staff of servants among whom a man or a maid of four or five years service was accounted a new-comer. They might not all be perfect, but they were all attached to their mistress; so there was sorrow and perplexity in their minds, after the return of her illness.

Sir Julius Martley arrived with Dr. Wilmot, who had met him at Penlow station, and had given him his own view of the case during the drive to Loringford.

The famous all-round doctor spent half an hour with the patient, and ten minutes in consultation with his colleague, forty minutes that gave Muriel an idea of infinity in time.

"He must think it a very bad case, or he wouldn't stay so long," she said piteously.

"Bosh," cried Randolph, "they may be talking of the weather. I know what prosers these old doctors are. He needn't be chary of half an hour for thirty guineas."

"He has been hours," said Muriel.

"Forty minutes by the clock," said Desmond.

Measured footsteps were heard on the stairs, the deliberate tread of the men who carry doom, and who walk evenly under the weight of other people's sorrow.

Muriel flew to meet them.

"Please come into the billiard-room," she said, "There is only my brother and Mr. Desmond, Grannie's friend."

The two doctors came into the bright light, Sir Julius a small spare man, with a magnificent forehead above keen grey eyes. Muriel stood tremblingly awaiting his verdict; but there was even more of apprehension in her brother's face. Desmond, who was watching him, had never seen a deadlier pallor, not even among his fellow jail-birds, where there were faces that wore the livery of despair.

"He is waiting to hear the opinion that may decide his fate," thought Desmond.

Sir Julius seated himself in a low arm-chair by the fire, and brought his knees very near his chin, a favourite attitude when he was thoughtful. He rubbed his hands gently, and looked at the three strange faces, diagnosing them, as if they were diseases. Muriel's prettiness pleased him. Anxiety had not spoilt her young beauty. He liked Desmond's countenance, for there mind was dominant. He looked longest at Randolph. That sickly pallor indicated a sad want of fortitude—a weakness of character that took fright too easily.

He had nothing terrible to communicate.

He had discussed the case with his friend Wilmot, and they were in accord as to the treatment. Mrs. Warden's illness was not the new influenza. It was nothing like the new influenza. His glance at his friend Wilmot implied a good-humoured contempt for the local doctor's diagnosis.

"The malady is gastric catarrh. Dr. Wilmot has taken due cognizance of this possibility, and his treatment has been perfect. The patient has a magnificent constitution, and all that is wanted is careful nursing."

"Ought we to send for a trained nurse?" Muriel asked.

"I believe the mere idea of a strange nurse will upset Grannie," Randolph said quickly.

"Oh, no, it won't. She may not like the notion, perhaps; but when she finds the difference between skilled and unskilled nursing, she will be reconciled to the change. I will send you two nurses tomorrow morning, for day and night work."

"Then you must think her seriously ill?" questioned Muriel, with a scared look.

"All illness is serious, my dear young lady. But with competent nurses, and Dr. Wilmot's care, you need not be anxious."

The two nurses arrived early next morning. One was small and black-haired and swarthy, the other was sandy and blooming. For the present, the fair one took command by day, the dark one by night, like Aurora and Nox.

And now there was no doubt in the household that Mrs. Warden was seriously ill. So long as her maid was waiting upon her, and the local practitioner alone prescribing, her illness might be an affair of a few days; but now no one could question the fact that the mistress was gravely ill.

Rooms were rearranged, changes were made in hours and daily meals, and a silence fell upon the house that had been gay. All the conditions of a serious illness were established, an illness that was going to last.

And now every premonition that had occurred since they left Hertfordshire was recalled by the household. They sat long, and they talked long, at table in the servants' hall, in the more ample leisure of a house where no visitors, except the leavers of cards "to inquire," were likely to come. They put their elbows on the table, and sighed over their honest Penlow ale, and talked of omens, such as thirteen at table, and a mysterious tapping on the outside shutters of the still-room, said by some to

be done by bats, a green silk gown chosen by Mrs. Warden for her own wearing, which was an obvious flying in the face of Fate, only of less evil augury than a robin in the dining-room, or a solitary magpie on the lawn.

Now that misfortune had come it seemed as if the air had been charged with warnings—like Rome before the death of Cæsar.

“I knew Lorringford would bring us no luck,” said the second house-maid, who had been jilted by a postman at Hitchin, since leaving Hertfordshire. “I never did like this place, and I never shall.”

## CHAPTER XVII.

AMONG the more serious interests of his life Desmond had not forgotten Skeddles the builder. With the aid of his observant and communicative landlady he had been kept so fully informed upon the subject that he could easily have written the story of Thomas Skeddles's life from day to day.

Mrs. Hawker was profoundly interested in the fortunes and conduct of the people among whom she lived, most of them being people whom she had known all her life ; for Lorringford village had not caught the modern fever of restlessness and change, and the old people in the cottages—pensioners of the great and the wealthy—and the old people in the almshouses, were the grandfathers and grandmothers of the young people in service, or in trade, the village dressmaker and village cobbler, the shop men and shop girls in the neighbouring towns.

Her intimate knowledge of her neighbours' lives from the cradle upwards made her keen to note new developments. Mrs. Hawker's eyes had opened on the light in Lorringford village, and she had no desire that they should close upon the light in any other place. She was not of the race that peoples new colonies, and flourishes in the backwoods of Canada. She came of a more ancient people : those who stay on the soil where they were born and for whom the love of home is a religion. She had no malice ; she was not a lover of scandal for scandal's sake. She did not gloat over the disgrace of a village beauty, or

rejoice when an old-established tradesman became bankrupt, or take pleasure in family quarrels, or the tortures of jealous wives. She was of a compassionate nature, and was sorry for everybody's trouble, and ready to help everybody, so far as her humble means would allow. But her neighbours were her books, and she read them diligently. The printed page had no charms for her. The best story that was ever written could not hold her attention. But the living story, the human book, never failed to interest her. She was curious about every line, and the turning of a page, some unexpected development in the life-history, thrilled her.

Tom Skeddles had always been a particularly interesting volume in her human library. *Imprimis*, she had seen him grow up, a fact upon which she enlarged with pride. His father had been the most important person in the village, self-educated, self-made, having risen from the brick-layer's hod to the command of a large and prosperous business, a man of tremendous respectability, whose work had in it something of mediæval massiveness and mediæval slowness, recalling the era of the master builder when architects were not indispensable.

Mrs. Hawker had seen young Skeddles grow up. She had seen him in his smart clothes, home for the holidays from his expensive boarding-school. She remembered his mother. She had gone all the way to Reading to see him married to Lady Jane Barlow's own maid, a pretty young thing, who had travelled with her mistress, and could speak French, but who was accounted a *mésalliance* for the heir of the Skeddles' business, who ought to have married a rich tradesman's daughter with a dowry. She had attended the funeral of Skeddles senior, who reposed under the largest red granite sarcophagus in Penlow cemetery.

It was pain and grief to her to see Tom Skeddles

hastening down the slope that leads to darkness and death, the death of body and soul ; for Mrs. Hawker had a religious mind, and she concerned herself about her neighbours' immortal spirit as well as their frail flesh.

" To see that young man's extravagance, and the way he do go on, turns my stomach," she told Desmond, " being as I can remember his father's careful ways, and how he built up such a business as there isn't another like it between Reading and Staines, working as he did for all the nobility and gentry on this side of the country—and piling up a fortune for this young fool to waste."

" Then you think his father left him a lot of money ? " questioned Desmond.

" Well, sir, folks said the father left nothing but the business, but that was reckoned to be worth fifteen thousand pounds, stock, and premises, and goodwill, horses and wagons, and the yard and house, and garden and paddock, which covers six acres of ground. But by the way he's spending—and the business going down visibly ever since the old gentleman died—one 'ud suppose there must have been ready money left as well. Or else where does he get it ? "

" You mean, where does he get the money he has been spending lately ? "

" Yes, that's where it is, sir. It's only within the last few months that he's broke out into such reckless extravagance. He gave way to the drink soon after his father's death ; and he neglected the business from the time he was his own master. I don't believe the goodwill is worth half it was the day of the old gentleman's funeral. But his extravagance has come to a head lately ; and she's just as bad, leastways if dresses and hats count for anything."

" As the husband is the wife is," quoted Desmond.

" That's true as gospel, sir."

“ And I suppose he drinks as badly as ever ? ”

“ Worse, sir. He was laid up with delirious tremors a fortnight ago. No doubt you took stock of him at the Parish Room on New Year’s Eve. It was all he could do to walk to his seat, and walk away again. And there he sat staring straight before him like an idiot, when he wasn’t fast asleep with his chin in his waistcoat, and his poor wife looking that miserable, in spite of her fine clothes and jewellery.”

“ Has he given his wife jewellery ? ”

“ She’s got a diamond brooch as handsome as anything of Mrs. Warden’s.”

“ Then he must have had a legacy.”

“ Where was it to come from, sir, when he never had a mortal belonging to him that made money, except his father ? And she was an orphan,” reverting to his wife. “ And I have heard say she was brought up in a charitable institootion where they take waifs and strays and bring them up so superior that they’ll never do a stroke of honest work in all their lives.”

“ Is Skeddles out and about again after this last attack ? ”

“ Oh, yes, he’s out and about, sir. But he’s had a very bad bout—the worst he’s had yet. I had it from Mrs. Grinley, the woman who nursed him, and has known him since he was a baby, which she was maid-of-all-work to his mother, when he was born, and no more respectable woman this side Penlow. She told me he was awful. Trying to catch flies in the bed curtain, or thinkin’ it was snowing and the snow falling all over his bed, crying out that he should be buried under a naverlunch, or talking wild talk about a box that ran about upon iron legs, like a great bloated spider ; and sometimes there was a pack of them, like long lean hounds, and he was a fox, and they was hunting of him. It made Mrs. Grinley’s blood turn cold to hear him, and his

poor wife used to run out of the room sobbing as if her heart would break ; for she's very fond of him, and he was a fine looking young man when she married him."

He heard much more of Mrs. Grinley's opinions before the dinner table was cleared, since it was Mrs. Hawker's custom to talk her fill towards the close of the simple meal, while her lodger trifled with a biscuit and a bit of cheese, or peeled an orange, or even while he moved to his armchair, and filled his after-dinner pipe. That was Mrs. Hawker's privileged hour ; and he would have found it difficult to curb her conversational powers, after having given them licence.

She told him how Mrs. Grinley had expected Skeddles's recent attack to be the last ; and how she did not give him more than one other such illness on this side of the grave. Mrs. Grinley accounted herself a shrewd diagnoser of this malady, having got her husband through sixteen attacks, but being beaten by the seventeenth, which proved fatal. The ways and symptoms of Skeddles had reminded her of her good man in his final attack.

Desmond turned his chair to the fire, when the door closed upon his landlady, and smoked the pipe of meditation. That was a curious phantasy about the boxes on iron legs, like famished hounds, hunting him. If Desmond had not been quite certain that Skeddles had stolen the deed-box, that vision of horror in the drink-madness would have borne testimony to the fact. He was melting the securities, and drinking himself to death with the proceeds. It was convertible capital, bonds that were easy to turn into gold. This money, twice stolen, had brought nothing but evil upon the thief ; and all hope of its restoration was over. Desmond could do nothing. He could only regret that he had yielded to his father's urgent entreaty, and charged himself with the custody of this accursed box.

He might have thought more about the decadence of Skeddles but for Mrs. Warden's illness, which day by day assumed a more serious aspect. There were fluctuations ; there were days when she seemed to have taken what the nurses called a favourable turn ; but while those who loved her were beginning to rejoice in the hope that the bad days were past, there was what the doctor called a "set back," and the cloud came down upon the house again, the cloud of fear, growing and darkening as the wintry days lengthened.

"It is so long since she first began to be ill," Muriel said despondently ; and Desmond could but agree that the malady was now of long standing, and that the doctors seemed to take things more seriously as time went on, yet were unable to make any effectual change in their treatment.

Sir Julius came again, after an interval of a fortnight, but only to repeat himself. There was no modification in the symptoms. There was no uncertainty now upon the part of either doctor as to the nature of the disease. It was an obstinate case of gastric catarrh. Medical science could do little. Careful nursing might do much. Sir Julius had perfect confidence in Nurse Dakin and Nurse Peterson. They had worked under him in many cases. It was an experience of years.

The nurses had been established at Lorringford nearly three weeks. It seemed to Muriel as if they had always been there, as if the doctor had been always coming morning and evening, with the same familiar sounds of carriage wheels in the drive, and the vibrating note of the electric bell, as if the cloud of fear had always hung over the house. It was difficult for her to recall what life had been like before her grandmother began to be ill ; the gaiety, the brightness and colour of it all.

Nox and Aurora had changed their functions.

The sandy-haired, milky-complexioned Nurse Dakin, whose looks suggested the morning, had taken night duty during the second week, and the dark nurse had watched by day. And now dark Nurse Peterson was again Nox, and the fair Dakin re-appeared as Aurora. This marked the third week of their service. It was the third week of skilled nursing, and the invalid's progress, with all its fluctuations, had been from bad to worse. Mrs. Warden was weaker, she was more irritable, but the splendid energy of her character asserted itself even against the iron rule of highly-trained nurses. She would not be isolated ; she would not be a prisoner in her own house. She must and would see her own people, whenever she chose to see them. The doctors had assured her that there was no fear of contagion in her malady, and only that fear would have prevented her from seeing Muriel.

The nurses temporized, urged the necessity of quiet and repose, but allowed their patient to receive the visits of her grandchildren. Muriel, who was to be depended upon for tact and discretion, was allowed to be in the sick room very often. Randolph came twice a day, and sat for ten minutes or a quarter of an hour in the big armchair by his grandmother's bed, making such conversation as he could out of the morning papers for her entertainment. She greeted him affectionately, and always seemed glad to see him. He was more sympathetic than she had hoped to find him ; and she began to blame herself for having thought him selfish and cold-hearted. After all, he was her daughter's son, the child of the daughter she had adored.

His visits were carefully timed when the nurse was off duty. He frankly owned that he had no liking for the craft, and that he looked upon the whole army of nurses, in their attractive uniforms and coquettish caps, as one of the impostures of a gullible and shallow-pated society.

"I believe the uneducated old women of the past did better by their rule-of-thumb treatment than these stuck-up young women with their medical books and clinical thermometers," he told Muriel, upon which she reproved him for his ignorance and his prejudice.

Muriel being on guard in the sick room, with Dowland in attendance, the day nurse was able to take a leisurely dinner in the sitting-room at the end of the corridor, or to go for an airing in the garden, and to enjoy a restful quarter of an hour in the afternoon at her tea. Mrs. Warden was glad to be able to talk to her grandchildren without the presence of a stranger.

"I have nothing to say against them," she told Randolph, "except that they are strangers, and that the mere sight of their white caps reminds me that I am seriously ill," and then, with an anxious look in her wasted face, she asked her grandson :

"Do you think I am ever going to get well ?"

"Of course you are, Grannie. Yours isn't a dangerous illness, it's only a tedious one."

"Tedious ! I should think it was tedious. If I don't die of the illness, I shall die of the monotony of this room. It wasn't half so bad when I was able to get up and spend a few hours on the sofa in the next room. That was the first stage of the journey—the journey in hope ! But to lie here like a log ! That's the second stage—the journey in despair."

Randolph and Muriel tried to comfort her with assurances of speedy recovery. This was one of her best days, when she was able to talk to them. There were days when she spoke no word, when she could only lie still and suffer in silence.

"It was very sweet of you to bring me those grapes, Rannie," she said. "They are finer than any we have left in our own houses."

Randolph had been in London the day before, and

had brought this tribute, as an attention to the invalid, having extorted ten pounds from Muriel before leaving Lorringford.

Muriel was now the purse-bearer. Mrs. Warden had opened an account for her granddaughter at the Penlow branch of her own bank, during the first week of her illness.

"You'll be afraid to trouble me about the household bills," she told Desmond, "so I shall pay a thousand pounds to Muriel's account, and she can sign any cheques that are wanted while I am ill."

Desmond was allowed to see the patient on her good days, and even when she was not well enough to see him he paid a daily visit to the morning-room during the nurse's absence, and often sat there for half an hour, while Muriel came to him occasionally with messages from her grandmother.

The aspect of the pretty morning-room was as completely changed as the aspect of daily life at Lorringford. All the ornaments, old china and modern china, Dresden pug and cockatoo, silver boxes and flower-vases, photographs and sofa-cushions, had given place to medicine-bottles and pill-boxes, patent foods, vaporizers, medicaments of every kind, things tried to-day and abandoned to-morrow, a collection of disagreeable things that suggested a cottage hospital rather than a lady's sanctum.

It was on one of Mrs. Warden's bad days that Desmond and Randolph were both sitting in this room during the fair-haired nurse's dinner-hour.

Dr. Wilmot had been in the morning, and had promised to look in again about tea-time, in addition to his nightly visit, a promise that filled Muriel with fear.

The two young men sat in a gloomy silence on either side of the hearth, where the blazing beech logs made the only spot of brightness in the room.

Outside the long French windows the sky was a cold blue, with white clouds blown about by a north-east wind, a fine day to look at through glass. There was a light iron balcony along this side of the house, which faced south-west, a balcony that had been added fifty years after the house was built, and which was an architectural blot. It was continued round a corner turret, one of the embellishments of the house. Randolph's room was in this turret, which had been appropriated to bachelor visitors from the beginning of things. It was a tradition that the turret-rooms on the first and second floor were young men's rooms.

Randolph had brought his newspaper, and was absorbed in its pages. He was rarely seen without a newspaper in these days of gloom. He hid himself behind the sheet, reading assiduously, and nobody knew the complexion of his thoughts. His speech was all that it should be ; full of concern for the invalid, anxious, sympathetic. Desmond had neither book nor paper. He looked at the burning logs, in melancholy thought. Sir Julius Martley was to pay his third visit that evening ; but he had lost faith in the physician's power, lost faith even in the patient's splendid constitution, upon which both doctors had dwelt with complacency, as if they looked to that to cure her, knowing their own failure.

The bedroom door was open. The rooms were kept at the same temperature, and the door of communication was seldom closed.

Mrs. Warden had been sleeping for some time, that uneasy slumber which inspired no hope in the watchers, but she had awakened, and Desmond heard her talking, though he could not hear her words. The tired voice did not travel far.

Suddenly there came a cry of horror, almost a shriek, from Muriel, and Desmond rushed into the sick room, followed by Randolph.

Mrs. Warden was sitting up in bed, with flushed

cheeks and wild eyes, talking rapidly, in a voice that gained strength as she went on, the spurious strength that comes from a fevered brain.

"I am being poisoned," she cried, "I know it, I feel it. It is not natural for me to be ill. I never had a serious illness till now—never—never. Somebody is trying to kill me. The doctors are fools! They don't see, they don't understand. I am dying of poison. My strength is being sapped, my life is made misery. Somebody is killing me."

She looked from one to the other. Her eyes were wild with excitement, but her speech was consecutive, her manner was resolute, the manner of a woman accustomed to be obeyed.

"Do you understand, Muriel?"

"Dearest, dearest Grannie, it is impossible," sobbed the girl. "It is utterly impossible. Everybody loves you. Who in this house could wish evil to you? We are all breaking our hearts about you. We are living upon the hope that you will soon be well. The servants adore you. The nurses are women of the highest character. Who in this house could try to poison you? Who in this house could be a secret murderer?"

"I know that I am being poisoned. Do you hear, Desmond, and you, Randolph! It is the truth. I have thought about it hour after hour, lying awake upon this hateful bed, where all my days and nights are weariness and pain. I have thought of it continually in the last week, and just now I had a dream, a dream that told me the secret of my illness—poison—slow poison! That's why the doctors are puzzled. That's why my splendid constitution can't save me. My splendid constitution!" she repeated, laughing bitterly. "The doctors prate about my splendid constitution, and I lie here and suffer torments, while a secret poisoner is stealing my life."

"Grannie, Grannie, it can't be true. You are so

guarded, so watched. But we'll watch more carefully still, if it is possible. I'll tell Sir Julius, and Dr. Wilmot. Don't be afraid, Grannie. Our love shall guard you."

"You are all affectionate and kind," murmured Mrs. Warden, "but there is someone hidden—a mad woman, perhaps, among the servants. You must find out, Muriel. Or you, Desmond. You are the cleverest of us."

She had sunk into her pillows again, exhausted by her vehemence. Her eyes closed, and Nurse Dakin, hurrying in, was only just in time to save her patient from fainting.

"I heard her talking as I came through the other room," said Nurse Dakin reproachfully, looking at them as if it was somebody's fault.

Muriel was too agitated for speech. She looked at the buxom nurse wildly, wondering if she were perchance a homicidal lunatic, who had managed to hide her madness under a hard business-like air. If there were any evil work being done it must be the work of madness. No sane person in that house could want to harm the kindest of women.

She followed Desmond and Randolph to the corridor.

"Can it be true?" she asked, looking from one to the other.

"Of course not," answered Randolph. "Poor dear Grannie was delirious. She had been dreaming. She said so. And she woke out of her dream in a panic. You'll find she will say no more about it, when she comes to herself."

"Yes, she started up out of her sleep. She had been dreaming, poor darling. But she was not delirious."

"Much you know about it," muttered Randolph.

Desmond stood grave and silent, till she appealed to him.

"What do you think, Mr. Desmond?" she asked.

" You know Grannie almost as well as I do, and you are fond of her. Is it a delusion, a kind of delirium ? "

" I don't think she was delirious. A patient's idea of her symptoms would not count for much, perhaps ; but in this instance I should give all possible weight to it. I think Mrs. Warden's illness is mysterious."

He pronounced the last word with exceeding gravity.

" Do you really ? " said Randolph. " I suppose, as you manage all my grandmother's business affairs, and put your finger into every pie, you consider yourself the proper person to manage her illness."

" Randolph," cried his sister, " how can you be sneering and disagreeable at such a moment, when we all three can have but one thought, how to guard our darling from danger ? "

## CHAPTER XVIII.

IT was the first time since their skirmish at Penlow station, that Randolph had permitted himself to be uncivil to the secretary, and he was quick to change his mood.

“Yes, of course, Muriel, that’s what we all want,” he said; “but I believe poor dear Grannie has upset herself and us without a shadow of reason. However, I suppose we had better tell her doctors.”

“Of course we must tell them. Dr. Wilmot is coming early this afternoon. I shan’t leave Grannie’s bedside till he comes.”

“Then you’ll be the next to be ill.”

“I don’t care if I am.”

“You’ll fuss yourself into a fever. And I suppose you’ll tell that red-haired nurse all about it, and ask her if she is poisoning Grannie?”

“I shall tell her nothing till I have seen the doctor.”

“That will be wise,” said Desmond, “and in the circumstances it will be wise for you to keep watch upon both rooms.”

He went back to the morning-room with her, and looked round thoughtfully, while Randolph stood in the doorway looking at him with a casual air. Each of the French windows opened with a brass latch, and there was a key to each. Desmond tried the handles of both casements, and locked both. Then he looked round the room. There was a glass

jug of lemonade on a table with clean tumblers, and there was a jug of barley water.

"I think you ought to throw both those drinks away," said Randolph, "and make some lemonade yourself. I'll do it myself," he added, as Muriel hesitated.

He unlocked one of the casements and threw it wide open, then took the two jugs and poured the contents into the flower-bed under the balcony. It was done so quickly that Desmond would hardly have been able to stop him, even if he had wanted to do so.

"If the poisoner had been tampering with those drinks they can do no harm now," said Randolph, as he shut the window, after putting the empty jugs on the table. "You can tell the nurse you did not think the stuff was fresh."

"She'll wonder at my interfering. Oh, Mr. Desmond, do you think she is the poisoner?"

"Nurse Dakin? What motive could she have?"

"She may be mad."

"I think not. But you'll have Dr. Wilmot to advise you this afternoon, and Sir Julius in the evening. I don't know what the doctors will say to your having thrown that stuff away," he said to Randolph. "It was rather like playing into the hands of the poisoner—if—"

"Bosh! We know that's all nonsense. I only did it to satisfy Muriel."

"You had better turn the key of this door when we are gone," Desmond told Muriel, having seen that the key was in the lock.

Muriel looked at him with a scared face, thinking that these precautions indicated his belief in a great danger.

"I think you've done about as much as you could to upset my sister," Randolph said, as they went downstairs.

"What does it matter who's upset? We've got to face a hidden peril."

"Well, if you can cure my grandmother by locking doors we shall all be grateful to you—but I don't seem to see it."

\*       \*       \*       \*       \*

Muriel was faithful to her watch all day, in spite of Nurse Dakin, who thought it might be better for her patient to be left quite alone.

"I shall not make as much noise as a mouse," Muriel replied, in a low voice.

She was sitting in a remote corner of the room, from which she could see the bed, and every movement of the nurse's about the patient, but where the patient could not see her. She watched Nurse Dakin with the eyes of a lynx, for if there were any grounds for her grandmother's terrible suspicion the poisoner had to be looked for in a narrow range, and this sandy-haired young woman had to be considered. Muriel remembered Miss Gwilt in "Armadale," and other wicked heroines in the world of romance, mostly remarkable for their red hair.

Mrs. Warden slept, in a troubled and fitful manner, for the greater part of the day, or lay awake with dull, weary eyes, and spoke no word. Her passionate outbreak of the morning had left her weak and apathetic, and the distressing symptoms of her disorder, the burning pains, the deadly sickness, were in no manner mitigated. Nurse Dakin watched her with an anxious face. Muriel wondered whether it was the face of an honest woman, or of a female Judas? Every dose of medicine, every form of nourishment which the nurse administered, might be a step upon the road to the grave. Muriel longed for the coming of the doctor.

She refused to go downstairs to luncheon, or to have anything brought to her. She would have her tea brought to the morning-room at half-past four.

Dr. Wilmot and the tea-table appeared together, and Muriel hurried to meet him, before he could enter the bedroom.

"I want to talk to you before you see Grannie."

Her scared face alarmed the doctor.

"Is she worse?" he asked.

"I don't know. I have something dreadful to tell you."

Randolph came into the room as she spoke.

"Do you want to hear Dr. Wilmot's opinion?" Muriel asked, surprised at his following the doctor.

"Of course I want to hear. It is a vital matter for us all."

"Then I'll send for Mr. Desmond. I should like him to be here."

"I don't see what my grandmother's amanuensis has to do with a question of this kind."

"Grannie appealed to him. Grannie would want him to be here," said Muriel, as she went out of the room.

She found Desmond in the corridor. He, too, had come immediately upon the doctor's arrival.

Dr. Wilmot looked at the three faces in perplexity and alarm.

"What has happened to upset you all?" he asked.

Muriel told him of the patient's sudden outbreak. She remembered every word of that terrible speech, and she repeated every word to the doctor, who listened gravely, but did not give much weight to the matter.

"She had been dreaming," said Randolph. "She said she had been dreaming."

"Her agitation may have been the result of a dream," said the doctor, "but it is more likely that the dream was the result of an idea upon which she had been brooding. We must clear her mind of imaginary terrors, or her nervous state will make it more difficult to cure the disease."

"Are you sure her terrors are imaginary ?" asked Desmond.

"My dear fellow, can you suppose any patient safer from attempted murder than this dear lady is ? Ringed round with love, guarded from the outer world, and with two competent nurses in charge of her day and night."

"But can we trust the nurses ?" asked Muriel.

"My dear young lady, what possible motive could a nurse have for poisoning her patient ?"

"No one who wasn't mad could want to hurt Grannie ; but might not one of the nurses be mad, without our knowing it ?"

"I've heard of concealed insanity, but I've never met with a case," said Dr. Wilmot. "You mustn't attach too much importance to an agitated speech of the dear lady's. Let us hope this troublesome attack will soon yield to treatment, and in the meantime it might be better to get some London expert to overhaul the drains, than to look for a mad poisoner."

"The drainage was all examined and approved by a sanitary engineer, before we came into the house," said Muriel.

"We'll hear what Sir Julius has to say about the case," said the doctor.

He went into the bedroom, Muriel hoping that he would make a searching scrutiny of the fair-haired nurse in spite of the scoffing spirit in which he had received her suggestion. If poison had been given to that dear woman some hand must have done the work, some stealthy hand must have mixed death with the refreshing drink, or with the medicine that was meant to cure. And for whom except the nurses would the systematic process of the slow poisoner have been possible ? It was a work that had to be done day by day and every day, the repeated symptoms sapping the victim's life, and simulating a

specific disease. Was it possible that doctors could look on and see their patient murdered?

Randolph left the room directly after the doctor, but Desmond stayed. He wanted to comfort Muriel, and lessen her anxiety if he could. He knew that she had eaten nothing since her early breakfast, and tried to persuade her to take something more than the cups of tea which she drank with feverish haste.

"No, I can't eat anything," she said. "How can you ask me, when you know how unhappy I am?"

"Will it make things better if you become ill, and unable to be with your grandmother?"

"No, no, I won't let myself be ill. That would be horrible. To be unable to keep watch!"

She took some bread and butter, and began to eat as if her life depended upon immediate food.

"Do *you* think it was only a dream?" she said.

"I think as Doctor Wilmot thinks, that Mrs. Warden had been brooding upon a horrible suspicion, and that the dream followed as a consequence."

"But do you think she could have any ground for suspicion—in this house?"

"It would seem impossible. But in such a case, for security, I would say, act as if her suspicion might be an inspiration. Watch over her as if you knew that an enemy was hiding in the shadow of her bed-curtains."

"You mean the nurse. But how can I protect her from the nurse who gives her everything she has to take?"

"I would except the nurses. We can have nothing to fear from them."

"But who else—who else has any opportunity?"

"Guilt can make opportunities. There are a good many people in this house. Trust the nurses—and shut out everybody else."

"You speak as if you thought someone was trying to kill her."

" I can only repeat what I said this morning. Her illness is mysterious. I always fear an evil I can't understand."

" I wonder what Sir Julius will say ! "

Desmond stayed in the morning-room till Doctor Wilmot reappeared, but neither he nor his companion spoke, and he knew that Muriel was crying. Desmond left as the doctor entered, and Muriel went to him, with clasped hands, and eyes still drowned in tears.

" Well ? What do you think about her ? "

" I am sorry to say she is no better. The symptoms are the same as yesterday, and every day leaves her a shade weaker."

" Tell me the truth. Do you think she is being poisoned ? "

" In the circumstances certainly not. Poison would be impossible, even if there were anyone in this house capable of doing her harm."

" Don't forget that there are mad women in the world, whose acts are not to be accounted for. Think, Dr. Wilmot, if some servant stole here in the night. The cooling drinks and the medicines have been kept in this room. The windows have not been locked, they have been left open sometimes for ventilation. Anyone might come through one of the spare rooms on to the balcony."

There were two rooms with French windows opening on the balcony, between Mrs. Warden's sitting-room and the turret. Dr. Wilmot unfastened one of the windows and went out on to the balcony, and made an inspection. He looked at every window and found all dark, till he came to the turret, where an electric lamp made a starry brightness in the winter gloom. Randolph was in the room, pacing to and fro. His shadow crossed the blind as he passed.

" Is that your brother's room at the end of the house ? " the doctor said, when he came in.

"Yes, Randolph always has the turret room. It's not large, but he likes it best."

"A quaint little room, no doubt," said the doctor as he locked the window. "I shall be here at half-past seven with Sir Julius, and all you have to do in the meantime is to keep watch in this room. Don't be afraid of Nurse Dakin. She will do us no harm."

## CHAPTER XIX.

RANDOLPH reappeared in the morning-room with the two doctors, and his manner indicated a commendable anxiety about the beloved patient. The anxious hours since the morning had affected him. He was paler than usual, and his eyes had a troubled look. All his attention was directed to Sir Julius, who spoke no word beyond his friendly greeting of Muriel, before he went into the sick room. Dr. Wilmot had no doubt told him of the incident of the morning. There would have been time for the two men to discuss the matter during the drive from the station. Randolph wondered what the great man thought about it.

He seated himself in the armchair opposite Muriel.

"Are you going to wait till they come back," she asked.

"Yes. You can't suppose I am not anxious to hear the London man's opinion."

"I thought you would see him in the billiard-room."

"I may just as well see him here."

He looked round the room. The glass jugs and tumblers, and a good many of the medicine bottles had disappeared. Nurse Dakin had taken them into the bedroom, after Dr. Wilmot's afternoon visit.

The time seemed long to those two who sat waiting in a dull silence, but it was less than half

an hour when Dr. Wilmot and his famous consultant came back to the sitting-room.

Muriel rang the electric bell twice, with an interval between the two sounds.

"What's that for?" Randolph asked sharply.

"For Mr. Desmond. I told him I should ring for him."

"You're a fool."

"I don't see any reason for you to object. Grannie appealed to him, and he ought to hear Sir Julius's opinion."

Sir Julius looked from the sister to the brother, and his eyes did not leave Randolph's face till the door opened and Desmond came in.

Dr. Wilmot had shut the bedroom door, and had drawn the tapestry *portière* across it, but the men spoke with lowered voices.

Sir Julius seated himself at the table by the reading lamp, and took a note-book out of his breast pocket. Randolph saw in his manner of doing this an indication that he was going to stay some time, and that he had a good deal to say. He was surprised by the physician's deliberate manner and grave countenance, having made up his mind that a fashionable doctor, whose minutes were gold, would not be likely to attach any importance to a sick woman's morbid fancies.

The note-book, the contracted brows, and the grave mouth, showed that Sir Julius was going to take those morbid fancies very seriously.

Muriel's first words went straight to the point.

"For God's sake tell us the truth, Sir Julius. Is my grandmother being poisoned?"

"My dear young lady, that is a very difficult question to answer," Sir Julius said quietly, with his eyes on the memoranda in his case-book, and a pencil in his hand; "but it is a question that will have to be answered. We have to put our heads together to answer it."

He lifted his eyes suddenly, and shot a glance that was like a searchlight upon the three anxious faces round the table, Muriel sitting opposite to him, the young men on each side of her. Sir Julius was celebrated for those searchlight glances, which overawed nurses, and gave invalids faith in his power to pierce the secrets of the ailing body.

Medical students said that "the X-rays weren't in it with J. M.'s eyes."

"In the surrounding circumstances, as my friend Wilmot observes, the suspicion of poison would seem preposterous," continued Sir Julius in his measured and tranquil voice; "but I am bound to tell you that the symptoms are not incompatible with poison. There is a poison—almost the unvarying resort of the secret poisoner—which simulates gastric catarrh, the complaint from which we suppose this dear lady to be suffering. Until the last few days there has been nothing abnormal in the course of the illness—for gastric disorders are apt to be fluctuating in their progress, and obstinate in resisting treatment. But in this case the symptoms have been curiously repetitive, and have not answered to specifics that are almost infallible in affording relief, if not speedy cure. In a word, the case has become mysterious."

"Mysterious," echoed Muriel. "That was what Mr. Desmond said."

Sir Julius shot a special searchlight, not at the secretary, but at Randolph.

"I should not in a common way attach importance to the suspicions of a sufferer tormented with pain and impatient of prolonged suffering, but in this case it would be wise to give Mrs. Warden's words the fullest consideration. I would have her so isolated that it would be from this moment impossible for anyone to tamper with her medicines or her nourishment. Dr. Wilmot will send his assistant to pass the night in this room by way of

watch-dog, and to take charge of the medicine which he will bring from the surgery. I have given Nurse Dakin her instructions."

"Does she think——" Muriel began.

"Nurses are not allowed to think. They have only to do what they are told. I shall see the night nurse before I go. And now, my dear young lady, do not make yourself unhappy. If there is a secret foe who has had access to this house—and if your grandmother's illness is not due to natural causes—we shall have time to arrest the evil. Her suspicion may be baseless, but we shall act as if we believed it. Our precautions can do her no harm. You may rely upon my friend Wilmot and the nurses."

"And you will come to see her again—to-morrow?"

"I will come if Wilmot wants me—but I don't think he will. I hope to find the patient out of danger when I come, this day week. And now I must see the night nurse, and we will leave this room in the charge of the nurse—and Dr. Wilmot's assistant, until to-morrow. Indeed, I should recommend that no member of the family should be admitted here or in the patient's room for the next day or two."

"Am I not to see Grannie, all that time?" Muriel asked piteously.

"Not unless she insists upon seeing you—and then I should advise you to see her in Dr. Wilmot's presence."

"I have been with her for hours every day."

"It will be better for her to be kept very quiet. You must be aware that her nerves have suffered a severe shock. Your own account of her agitation this morning has to be considered."

"Dearest Grannie! I will do anything that is best for her," Muriel said tearfully. "I will be like the nurses. I will try not to think."

"That will be good and wise. And now go downstairs, and keep up your spirits."

"I am not to be in a fool's paradise, and then to be told that my darling is worse—much worse—dying?"

"No, no! Dr. Wilmot will be quite frank with you."

"Will you promise?" she asked, appealing to Wilmot.

He gave her his word of honour. She should be told of every change for better or worse. Nothing should be kept from her.

They all left the room together. Sir Julius to go with Dr. Wilmot to the sitting-room on the other side of the corridor which the day and night nurses shared. Nurse Peterson would have her supper in this room before she relieved Nurse Dakin.

Randolph stopped Sir Julius as he was crossing the corridor.

"You don't think she's going to die?" he asked anxiously, with his hand upon the great man's arm.

The great man drew his arm away from the intrusive hand, as if resenting a liberty.

"We are not going to let her die," he said.

## CHAPTER XX.

IT was nearly nine o'clock when Muriel and the two young men sat down to a dinner that seemed a mockery. No one had any appetite, yet everyone tried to eat. Randolph asked for champagne.

"I want it more for you than for myself," he told Muriel, "you look awfully washed out."

A bottle was opened, of which Randolph drank three parts. He had forgotten that his sister never took wine. Desmond allowed his glass to be filled, but did not empty it, and the butler, who knew his temperate habits, brought him Apollinaris.

Butlers, if old servants, have certain privileges, and one in which they take pride is the privilege of communicating any terrible or startling news, most especially the news of a death, whether of local or imperial interest, reigning sovereign or village baker.

Mr. James Webb, Mrs. Warden's factotum of more than twenty years' service, was second to no butler in his appreciation of this particular function.

During the early part of the dinner any close observer might have perceived a suppressed importance in Webb's bearing, a suggestion of reserved force, the restraint of a strong man charged with the burden of greatness. But it was not until the dessert had been handed, and the footmen had gone, that he delivered himself of his mystery.

"There has been a bad accident, miss," he said,

“ Mr. Skeddles, the builder, has been run away with in his tandem, and very nearly been killed.”

Muriel started out of her sorrowful silence, with an exclamation of surprise.

“ That’s bad,” said Desmond.

“ No more than everybody expected, sir. Horses bolted a mile from the village—motor car startled ‘em. They was always a bit above themselves. Mr. Skeddles was in liquor, as usual. Couldn’t guide ‘em. The leader turned short round by the water mill, and upset the trap, and Skeddles was pitched on to the road.”

“ Did you hear if he was dangerously hurt ? ”

“ They say the doctor don’t give much hope. He’s a good bit hurt about his ribs and chest ; but it isn’t as bad as it might have been if he’d pitched upon his head. He was quite sensible when they picked him up, or at least as sensible as he ever is, and he swore at the horses awful.”

Desmond was thoughtful. Muriel showed no sign of interest. How could she concern herself about a drunken builder when her beloved was in peril ? Randolph took no notice of the butler’s communication, and that trustworthy servant retired with a feeling that his news had fallen flat. He had thought the intelligence would have served a good purpose in diverting Miss Hammond’s mind from dwelling on her grandmother’s illness.

Desmond followed Muriel out of the dining-room, leaving Randolph to a solitary cigarette.

“ It is past ten, so I’ll say good-night here,” he said to Muriel.

It had been his habit to stay till ten o’clock since Mrs. Warden’s illness had become serious.

“ Must you go ? ” Muriel asked helplessly. “ I feel so miserable—and—it would be kind if you would stay all night. There are empty rooms enough in this great melancholy house, and we would have one aired and made ready for you. I should feel

safer if you were here to help us in our watch against the enemy."

"There may be no enemy; but, in any case, your grandmother is safe. The doctors are providing against a danger that may be imaginary."

"I know. But from the moment that dreadful word was spoken I have been full of fear. Poison! Think what the word means! Secret murder!"

"I will stay, if you like. I can run back to the lock-house and get my bag, and make Mrs. Hawker's mind easy."

"It will be so kind of you. But let me send one of the servants."

"I'd rather go myself."

Muriel rang a bell.

"Tell Mrs. Lane to have one of the upstairs rooms aired, and to be sure there is a good fire. Mr. Desmond will stay here to-night."

The hall-door bell rang while she was speaking, a prolonged insistent ringing.

"What can that be? It must be one of the doctors come back," said Muriel, alarmed.

It was Mrs. Skeddles, with dishevelled hair and hat awry, blown about in crossing the backwater.

"I want to see Mrs. Warden's grandson," she said agitatedly, "I beg your pardon for coming so late, Miss Hammond, but my poor husband is in such a sad way. He thinks he's dying, poor dear. And he wants to see your brother."

"I am very sorry—sorry for you and for him," Muriel said kindly, the sight of Mrs. Skeddles's grief-stricken face helping her to realize somebody else's distress, even in the midst of her own, "but what can he want with my brother? I don't think Randolph has ever spoken to him."

"Oh, yes, he has, miss—Mr. Hammond used to take a lot of notice of Tom's horses. He even wanted to buy one—for a lady to drive, but they couldn't agree about the price. Mr. Hammond

knows him, and Tom wants to see him. There's something on his mind that he wants to tell your brother."

"I can't understand."

"No more can I, miss ; and I think Tom must be light-headed ; but he begged and begged of me to come and ask Mr. Hammond to go to him, and I couldn't refuse. He's so low—and they won't let him have anything but water, with a teaspoonful of brandy in it. And it's such a denial for him that's been drinking hard for the last two years."

Randolph came out of the dining-room while Mrs. Skeddles was talking, and she had to repeat her appeal.

"I can't imagine anything he can have to say to me," he said, when he had heard her.

"But you won't refuse to go and see him, poor fellow?" Muriel pleaded.

"Oh, if I can do him any good I suppose I ought to go."

"It may pacify him, sir," Mrs. Skeddles said piteously. "He thinks he's got something to tell you—and if it's a delusion it may pacify him to see you. He says he can't go down to the grave without getting something off his mind. He would rather have seen your gran'ma, but you'll do next best."

"It's all a parcel of delirious rot," said Randolph ; "but if the poor chap is dying, I can't refuse."

The butler who had assisted at this scene, brought him his hat and overcoat, and he went out with Mrs. Skeddles. Desmond had listened with attentive ear and thoughtful brow, but had spoken no word.

Muriel went up to the corridor. The night nurse had promised to come to the door of the morning-room with the last news of the patient at half-past ten, and the girl stood outside the door for nearly ten minutes oppressed with dread.

Nurse Peterson was punctual. As the hall clock chimed the half-hour she opened the door, and Muriel saw the doctor's assistant seated by the table, in the light of the reading lamp.

The watch-dog was there.

"How is dear Grannie?"

"I believe she's just a shade better. She's certainly a little easier than she was this time last night. I mustn't stop, miss."

The door was shut on the last word, but the report had been favourable, and Muriel's step was lighter as she ran downstairs.

Desmond did not come back with his bag till after eleven. Randolph had not returned from the village. Muriel wandered in and out of the rooms from the drawing-room to the library—from the library to the billiard-room, switching on lights and switching them off again, restless and anxious, though somewhat relieved by the nurse's report.

She told Desmond, who advised her to go to bed and get a good night's rest.

"I must sit up for Randolph. I want to hear about poor Skeddles."

"Won't that do to-morrow morning?"

"No, I want to hear about him. So strange, isn't it, that he should ask to see Randolph? Do you think it was on his conscience that he had overcharged Grannie too awfully for his work, and that he couldn't die in peace without confessing?"

"Tradesmen are not usually so scrupulous—and I believe Skeddles was honest, as builders go. Would you like a game of billiards while you are waiting?"

"No, no, no. I can't touch a cue till Grannie is worlds better."

She went back to the drawing-room. Desmond found himself a book and sat reading in the library till Randolph came in a few minutes before twelve. Desmond had waited to hear about Skeddles.

Muriel ran out into the hall as her brother took off his overcoat.

"Well," she asked eagerly. "Is the poor thing very bad?"

"Bad enough, but not so bad as his wife made out. I should think he might live for a week."

Randolph was flushed, and his eyes had an unusual brightness. The face was curiously changed from the countenance upon which Sir Julius had flashed his searchlight five hours ago. It would seem as if he had indulged himself with a liberal allowance of the brandy that was denied to Skeddles.

"But what had he to tell you—his confession—the dreadful thing that was upon his mind?" Muriel questioned excitedly.

"Rot. Light-headed nonsense."

"Had he *nothing* to tell you?" with wide open eyes.

"Nothing that I could make sense of. He rambled and talked—nineteen to the dozen—but no sense. Are you staying to-night, Desmond?" he asked, turning to the secretary, with surprise and evident displeasure.

"Your sister wished me to stay."

"Well, I'm going to bed, and I suppose everybody else is."

"We've only waited to hear about Skeddles," said Muriel.

She wished them both good-night, and ran upstairs.

Randolph followed whistling softly to himself as he went, "La donna è mobile."

Desmond began to think that there was such a thing as the devil's luck, and that his sable majesty took care of his faithful disciples.

Muriel saw the night nurse at seven o'clock next morning, when she came off duty. Again her report was comforting, the patient had had a better night.

There was a surprise for Muriel when she came down to breakfast. Her brother had left Lorry-

ford at eight o'clock, to catch an early train for London. Webb was to tell her that he would be back in a few days, and she was to telegraph a report of the patient's progress to his club every morning. His club was a young man's club, sporting and not political, a club where men backed horses, played cards, and quarrelled about actresses.

Desmond finished his secretarial work at ten o'clock, when he found Muriel roaming about the desolate drawing-rooms, mystified and vexed by her brother's conduct.

"To think that he could leave this house while dearest Grannie's life is trembling in the balance," she exclaimed tearfully.

"You must not expect him to feel quite as you do."

"No, not as I do. Grannie has not cherished him as she has cherished me. She wasn't allowed to have him. That's his misfortune, poor fellow. But she has been so kind to him, so generous. And that he could leave her for any business or pleasure of his own ! It's horrible."

There had been something much more horrible, Desmond thought, something that Muriel must never know. He had gone. The one evil presence had vanished, the presence that Desmond had regarded with an increasing antipathy ever since that October afternoon when the young man first appeared in the peaceful family group, and struck a discord in life's music.

Desmond had his ideas about this sudden departure, and when Dr. Wilmot had been and had confirmed the nurse's report of the patient's improved condition, he told Muriel that he was going to see Skeddles.

"Yes, pray go and see the poor creature, and if he is worrying about his overcharges tell him Grannie didn't mind the extras being so heavy. She has plenty of money, and never thinks of a bill after she has paid it."

And then as he was leaving her she said :

“ I hope you’ll come back to lunch. Vera will be here. I had a letter from her this morning. She is coming to me for a day or two, just to try and help me to keep up my courage while Grannie is ill. Isn’t it sweet of her ? ” and then without waiting for his assent : “ She must know nothing of our scare yesterday.”

“ No, no, of course not.”

“ You see, it was only a kind of nightmare, since dearest Grannie is better already. That frightful panic of hers was the crisis, perhaps, just the moment when her illness was at its worst. She is not out of danger yet. Dr. Wilmot calls it a slight improvement. She is just a little easier. The dreadful burning pain and the sickness have been less. I musn’t be happy about her yet ; but I am not so miserable as I was yesterday.”

“ I have a conviction that all will be well,” Desmond said.

“ Really, really ? That gives me courage ; for I know you love her.”

Thomas Skeddles lay upon his respectable brass bed, curtained with expensive cretonne where purple tulips sprawled over a grass-green ground. The best bedroom at Myrtle Cottage—a substantial square house, adjoining the builder’s yard—was as comfortable a room as the heart of a rural tradesman could desire. Indeed the heart of Mrs. Skeddles had been swollen with pride when she took possession of that well-appointed chamber, where ornamental additions in the way of crockery, and oleo copies of Landseer’s most famous pictures, had been bought to do her honour.

But Skeddles was in a bad way ; and Mrs. Skeddles could only sit and cry, in the shadow of the purple and green curtains. Her husband had got beyond her capacity of nursing. She had helped him

through a good many bouts of delirium tremens. She had boasted that she knew his ways, and knew what to do for him. But his present case was different. Broken ribs and internal haemorrhage had carried him into a region where neither she nor Mrs. Grinley could help him.

He was conscious, perhaps more fully conscious than he had been for a long time, the cloud of alcohol under which he had existed of late years having been rudely dispersed by the shock of his accident and the severity of his doctor. His brain was unclouded; but he was very low, and inclined to weep over his sad condition.

"I should be glad of a few minutes' confidential talk with your husband, if you'll leave me with him," Desmond said.

Mrs. Skeddles hesitated.

"You won't say anything upsetting, sir," she faltered.

"No, no. I won't forget that he is very ill. I will be careful."

Thus assured. Mrs. Skeddles dried her tears, and went out to the landing, where she put a chair against the door and sat on guard, ready to rush to her husband's relief if she heard any sound of agitation or distress. The ready-made Norwegian door would not exclude the sound of raised voices.

"Now, my good fellow," Desmond began gently, "I'm very sorry to see you in this bad way, and I am not going to say anything unkind. I only want you to give me a truthful answer to a straight question. What was it you had to tell Mr. Hammond last night?"

"I don't see that it's any business of yours."

"It is my business; and it concerns me more nearly than you can understand. Now, I want you to be reasonable. You have been spending a good deal of money lately, and I happen to be the only person who knows anything about that money."

Now, if you will be candid and straight with me, I will guarantee that you shall never be troubled about the securities you have melted——”

“ I’m going where nobody can trouble me. I’ve only got to satisfy God Almighty.”

“ Who knows if you may not get over this—and live to be old ? I promise you—if you make a clean breast of it—you shall not be called upon to account for the money you have spent—stolen money, you know—not if you live to be ninety.”

“ There’s not much chance of my living,” Skeddles murmured dolefully, and then, with a kind of stolid self-approval, he added: “ I’ve done what I could to satisfy God Almighty.”

“ I know what you have done. You have given Mr. Hammond the remaining securities, to hand over to Mrs. Warden.”

“ By Jupiter ! Did he tell you ? ”

“ Never mind what he told me. That’s the truth, is it not ? ”

Skeddles waxed restive, and refused to answer.

“ I don’t know what you’re driving at,” he said in a sullen voice, “ and I think you might have better feeling than to come and cross-question a dying man.”

“ I don’t believe you are going to die, Skeddles. I met your doctor as I came through the village, and he told me you might pull through.”

“ They always say that till an hour before a fellow kicks the bucket ; and then they say things have taken a turn they weren’t prepared for. That’s what the doctor said about father.”

There was a silence. Desmond sat looking at the fire, the blinds had been drawn down while the patient slept, and the red light of the fire threw fitful gleams on the mahogany furniture—on an old brass-handled bureau, on the Pembroke table, and on the edge of an oblong metal box under the bureau.

It was this box that attracted Desmond’s eye

presently when he looked about the room. It had been pushed far back under the bureau. The red light was shining on the corner nearest the front. Desmond could see enough to be sure that it was just such a box as the one he had hidden at Loringford.

He got up without a word, went over to the bureau and drew out the box from under it, Skeddles watching him.

"I see the lock has been forced, and the box is empty," he said quietly. "Now, Skeddles, you may as well be frank with me. You wanted to make restitution, you wanted to set your mind at ease, and reconcile yourself with your Creator. It was a laudable act; but you set about it in a foolish manner. Now answer one question, like a good fellow. What was the amount of the American bonds you gave Mr. Hammond?"

"You might as well ask Mrs. Warden. He was to hand them over to her."

"He has not done so—yet."

"But he's not going to turn thief and stick to the money?"

"If he does you may be sure it won't do him any good. Come now, how much was left after your spurt of splendour, your horses, and your wife's diamonds?"

"I only melted about fifteen hundred quid—I sold the bonds through my Reading bankers. They're fair and square, and they wouldn't cheat me. I gave Hammond securities that ought to realize over twenty-three thousand pounds. He's a scoundrel if he doesn't hand them over to his grandmother. I took the box out of her house, and I wanted to give the property back to her. If it belongs to Sir Harley Gowering's daughter, Mrs. Warden can give it up to her. That's her look out. I'm shot of it."

"Thank you, Skeddles. You may make your mind easy about the fifteen hundred. Nobody you

need care about will be the loser by that. You can sell your wife's diamonds and give the money to a hospital—conscience money, you know. And now you had better try to get well."

"Not much chance. But how did you know about the money?"

"That's my secret."

"I knew you knew about the box that day you made me look at the tile flooring in the passage. It's a rum start. But if that young man doesn't hand over the bonds——"

"Don't excite yourself. Perhaps I've let you talk too much already——"

Desmond opened the door, and nearly knocked Mrs. Skeddles out of her chair.

"I beg your pardon, sir. I wasn't listening. I only wanted to be sure Tom wasn't upsetting himself."

"I don't think he has done himself any harm, and I hope he may get over his accident."

"The doctor said there was a chance, sir, and, oh, I hope if he is spared he'll take more care of himself. The drink was killing him. The accident only made things worse," said Mrs. Skeddles, drowned in tears.

"Perhaps he will take that as a warning. And I'm sure you will do all you can to help him."

"Oh, sir, I'd give half my life to save his. He was such a fine young man when we were married, and such a gentleman."

She remembered his white doeskin gloves, his patent leather shoes and scarlet socks, the flower in his button-hole, and the genial ways of a young man who liked to open a bottle of champagne on any joyous occasion, but who was seldom the worse for liquor. Drink had been a creeping paralysis of mind and body, advancing with stealthy pace, till the fine young man had become a wreck. Whether medical aid or a wife's devotion could make the shattered vessel sound again was a question that only time could answer.

## CHAPTER XXI.

“ VERA will be here.”

Remembering that promise as he went back to Lorringford, it was difficult for Desmond to think about Randolph and the plunder he had carried to London with him. It was a sorry end for the hidden money that might have been given back to the Bank. But what good could anyone hope from such treasure? It had been stolen by the conspirators, and it had been stolen for the second time by Skeddles, and now it had made Randolph Hammond a thief, as well as a potential murderer. And who could doubt that it would be spent upon evil things? Upon the whims and fancies of a worthless woman, upon feasting and brainless amusements, upon expensive clothes, upon the turf, at Monte Carlo, on everything base and vulgar and baneful. It would melt and vanish like the snowflakes in the river, or like the fortune of the Jubilee Plunger.

What was Desmond to do? Hunt down the thief, and take the plunder from him? He could only do that as Mrs. Warden’s steward, and anything he could extort from Randolph he must hand over to her. She would refer to the late owner of Lorringford, who would know nothing about it, and the property might ultimately go to the Crown as treasure trove. Not much good could come of it any way; but its worst use would be in the hands

of Randolph, the man, who, in Desmond's opinion, was in purpose and deliberate attempt a murderer.

From the moment in which the word "poison" had been uttered, Desmond had thought of Randolph as the only possible criminal within the walls of Lorrington Place. He alone had a motive for desiring that good woman's death. He had been told what he had to gain by it. Those signs of anxiety, suspense, expectation, which Desmond had attributed to the feelings of a man whose fortunes wavered in the balance, had been of a darker kind. The agitated countenance, the anxious eye, were those of the undetected poisoner, on the watch for the first hint of suspicion in those experts whom he had to circumvent.

Desmond had seen Randolph face to face with the famous doctor, whose acumen he would naturally dread more than the perceptions of the hard-worked local practitioner, and, looking back on the first conversation with Sir Julius Martley, he could remember indications of guilt, signs and tokens that were easily read by one who had the key to the working of that crooked mind.

Everything in Randolph's manner after the idea of poison had been mooted had a guilty air. His cat-like watchfulness, his eagerness to hear all that the doctors had to say, his nervous irritability, were the marks of the inexperienced criminal, the amateur in murder, not subtle enough or hardened enough to keep himself cool and placid when suspicion was in the air. The one active indication of fear, the act of throwing away the contents of the two glass jugs, had been almost a confession.

And now he had gone to London with his stolen wealth. It was liquid money. He would have no difficulty in realizing the whole of it. No one would ask any questions. He would take the securities to

a stockbroker and they would be turned into cash. And then, a rich man for the time being, he would go gaily down the primrose path, and perhaps forget that he had ever attempted a deed of unspeakable darkness, murder under its most hideous aspect, the stealthy doing to death of a kind and generous kinswoman. He would kill the memory of his wickedness in trumpery pleasures, the slave of a profligate woman.

Desmond did not mean him to escape any punishment that it was in his power to inflict. He did not mean to let him suppose that his crime was unknown, and above all he did not mean to let him come back to Lorrington by and by, when he had squandered the stolen money, to be pardoned and received with kindness as the prodigal son. Somehow or other that must be prevented, although Desmond hoped that neither Mrs. Warden nor Muriel need ever be told of his uncompleted crime.

It would break the grandmother's heart to know that there was such a capacity for evil in her own flesh and blood, the offspring of her beloved daughter. It would break Muriel's heart to know that her brother belonged to that execrable class of criminals whom no one can pity, the murderers who can smile in the face of the victim while their deadly work is in progress.

Desmond found the two girls in the garden, looking at the snowdrops and the winter aconite, and the green spikes of tulips that promised their beauty in the spring.

"Vera made me come out," Muriel said deprecatingly. "I have not been in the garden for a fortnight."

"It is very wrong of you to stay indoors so long."

"How could I take pleasure in anything while Grannie was so ill? Nurse Dakin is quite satisfied about her to-day. She sleeps better, and she is

suffering less pain. But she is still seriously ill. We must not forget that."

She sighed, and looked unhappy, afraid that she had been taking life too easily while she walked on the wooded hill with Vera, hearing about Leonard's work at Oxford.

"It was lovely in the wood," she said. "Spring is in the air to-day."

Spring, Summer, Elysian flowers, were in the air for Desmond, while Vera looked at him kindly.

He asked after Sir Emanuel.

"Father is wonderfully well, and very happy. Windsor is in the busy world, and he has plenty of occupation. His palaeontological friends come down to see him, men who knew Darwin and Huxley. We were very sorry to leave the moor; but I think Windsor is better for my father."

"I have not told Vera about our scare," said Muriel confidentially, falling into the rear with Desmond, while Vera strolled towards the greenhouses.

"It was much better not."

"I feel sure now that it was the crisis in Grannie's illness. Don't you think so?"

"It may have been."

"The pain and the weariness had begun to affect her brain. She had had horrible dreams, and that dreadful hallucination had taken hold of her. I believe yesterday was the turning point in her illness, and that she will get well. Oh, if I could venture to believe that, what a happy creature I should be!"

"I think you may venture to believe it. I think the cloud is lifted from this house."

"I pray God it may be so. But how could Randolph go away while we are in suspense? I believe Vera thinks it was hateful of him."

"He may have had some particular reason."

"No reason could justify him. I telegraphed to

him at his horrid club after Dr. Wilmot had seen Grannie, though it was more than he deserved. I used to be so fond of him. I almost worshipped him when I was a child and saw him very seldom."

They followed Vera, who was admiring the azaleas. Cobb, the head gardener, was proud of his azaleas, and hoped to win prizes at a show on the first of March.

"We ought to have some of these in the hall," said Muriel.

Cobb opined that the hall was draughty, and would be the death of them.

"Then we'll have them in the drawing-room."

Cobb was sure the drawing-room would be too hot.

"I'll bring them up directly after the show, miss. You wouldn't like Lorringford to come off second best, I'm sure. I've got some fine hyacinths in the other house that'll do better for the drawing-room, and I can give you some tulips for the hall."

For this bounty Muriel had to be grateful, even although Cobb refused her his choice white cyclamen, which were also destined for the show.

"Folks haven't seen anything up to that about here, miss, and it's likely they'll take a first prize," Cobb told her.

"And if the azaleas and the cyclamen take first prizes, Cobb will ask to have his wages raised," said Desmond, as they left the houses, "and that's the way the world goes round."

Muriel went to the morning-room door before luncheon, and had a five minutes interview with Nurse Dakin, who gave a good report of the invalid. She had asked to see her grand-daughter, but had not remonstrated when she was told that the doctors wished her not to see anyone for a day or two.

"The fact is she is quite worn out with her

illness, and she wants nothing but sleep," Nurse Dakin said.

"And you really and truly think she will get better?" Muriel urgently questioned.

"Certainly I do," said the nurse. "But you mustn't expect wonders. She was very low yesterday. She is having some nice sleep to-day."

The luncheon was a leisurely meal, and the talk was gay and bright. Muriel was cheered by Vera's company, now that the invalid's condition was more hopeful. She could not have endured even the most sympathetic companionship yesterday, in her despair. To-day she could think of pleasant things, and she discussed the places to which dearest Grannie could be taken for her convalescence. It would be just the season for Cannes, or Mentone; and they might go on to the Italian lakes, or to Venice, in April.

"I wish you could go with us, Vera," she said.

"I would go with you if the moor would do," Vera answered laughingly; "when April comes I know I shall yearn for the moor."

"I can't think how you can be so fond of Dartmoor, when there is that horrible prison in the midst of it, to remind you of crime and misery," said Muriel.

"That is only one of the contrasts of life," said Desmond, touched by the little look of distress that Vera turned upon him, at this allusion. "In Venice you have the dark cavern under the Bridge of Sighs, and the stifling cells under the leads."

"Ah, but those are only memories of the past. On Dartmoor there are living creatures who suffer."

"Not so much as people think perhaps," said Desmond. "I have been told that the life is rather pleasant: daily tasks in fine mountain air, regular exercise, plain diet, cleanliness, early hours, a regimen that conduces to health and long life."

"It is heartless of you to joke about the poor creatures," Muriel said reprovingly. "Their clothes alone would be punishment enough for anything less than premeditated murder."

Desmond went to his den after luncheon, and did not re-appear till half-past four, when Dr. Wilmot paid his second visit, and gave an encouraging account of the patient.

"We are holding our own," he told Desmond, who met him in the hall, "and if we can go on as well for the next few days we shall be out of the wood. Miss Hammond very naturally wants to see her grandmother, and I do not find any objection to her seeing her for five minutes this evening, with the nurse."

And then as he took up his hat and gloves, he asked with a casual air :

"What has become of Mr. Hammond?"

"He went to London early this morning."

"Is he expected back to-night?"

"I don't know."

"Tell Miss Hammond not to forget that Sir Julius insists upon his patient being kept very quiet, and that no one is to be admitted to Mrs. Warden's morning-room except the nurses. A great deal depends upon repose—and isolation. My assistant will be here for the night. He can get plenty of sleep on that comfortable sofa, and he will be at hand if he should be wanted."

"The doctors have made up their minds," Desmond thought, as the local practitioner stepped into his dogcart.

Muriel insisted upon the secretary's staying to tea. The doctor's report had made her quite happy. Mrs. Lavington, the Vicar's wife, had called to inquire about Grannie, and she was in the drawing-room with Vera. He positively must not go.

"You have no excuse, now your novel is finished," said Muriel.

“ I have always proofs to correct.”

“ They can wait. You must stay to hand teacups and make yourself useful.”

“ Heaven knows how gladly I yield to the temptation,” he said, laughing at her insistence.

She looked at him earnestly for a moment or two. She had begun to suspect that, whatever his obligations might be to some mysterious heroine in his past life, he was now devoting himself to Vera Penroyal. It hurt her to think so poorly of him ; yet she was glad that she had not been the chosen of so unstable a lover, to be adored and forgotten in a quarter of a year. It was not much longer since he had told her solemnly of a love that was to endure for his life.

She remembered one of those Shakespearian songs that she sometimes warbled in her happy moods, as she ran about the house.

“ Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more,  
Men were deceivers ever.”

Tea lasted even longer than luncheon. The Vicar’s wife had been at a meeting—one of those meetings that weigh heavily upon the days of good women in a rural parish. She had been patching up peace between neighbours and kinswomen, who had quarrelled, as only cottagers can quarrel, about things that each had said of each other’s belongings. Mrs. Smith of Mrs. Jones’s son, and Mrs. Jones of Mrs. Smith’s daughter.

“ And what makes it worse they are all cousins,” said the Vicar’s wife, who was exhausted by her righteous afternoon, and was glad to sit by the fire in Muriel’s favourite grandfather-chair and sip strong tea, and nibble the savoury sandwiches and chocolate cakes that Desmond brought her.

At last there came the moment when she remembered that she had a husband and a parish, and a penny reading at eight o’clock that very evening,

whereupon Desmond offered to row her to the church landing-stage, an offer accepted with fervour.

"I declare it's almost dark," she said, "but it has been such a delicious rest, after the stuffy parish-room, and those dreadful old women."

Desmond found her enchanting on the little voyage, for she talked of Vera all the way, being especially interested in her, first because she was a new figure in this tiny world by the Thames, and next, because she was a parson's daughter, and that parson a ninth baronet. Desmond was content to be as snobbish as Mrs. Lavington liked, and to dwell upon the ancient house of Penroyal, so long as he could get her to talk of Vera.

"She is not so pretty as Muriel," Mrs. Lavington said, loyal to the kindest people the parish had ever boasted, people who subscribed generously to everything, and kept open house for the Vicarage family. "She has not Muriel's dainty prettiness: but she has a grander air, more intellect in her face, don't you know? Such a magnificent brow! And nobody could help admiring that splendid hair, worn so simply, like a Greek goddess."

This carried them comfortably to the landing-stage, and Desmond insisted on seeing the lady to her own door, before he took the boat back to Lorriford.

He went to his quiet lodging with a light heart. Vera had been kind. Their talk had been of the most trivial, the most impersonal order, the only serious subject touched upon being Mrs. Warden's illness. But to live those hours in the same room with her had filled his cup of bliss. She had been kind; and their ideas even about common things, public events, the new books, the local gossip, had been always in harmony. More than once a look had flashed from eye to eye, a look that said, "Of course we think alike about this, and about everything."

He would see her again to-morrow, and the next

day, and perhaps the day after that, for Muriel would entreat her to stay, and as Mrs. Warden's condition improved the atmosphere of the house would brighten, and life would fall back into the old grooves. He would spend at least one hour of each day in her company, but he would have to put constraint upon himself, and to respect the position of two girls without a chaperon. He had indeed made some provision for the etiquette of the situation by imploring Mrs. Lavington to drop in upon them as often as she could, and he counted on that amiable lady as an excuse for his company in the drawing-room, or in the garden.

He spent his evening hours reading and dreaming. He had talked of proofs to correct, but those could stand over. His novel, "*An Angel of Mercy*," was to appear after Easter. Would Vera know herself in that creature of his fancy, he wondered? There were points of likeness that she could not fail to see: and in the idealization, the exaltation of the character to transcendental beauty and power, she would understand how love can weave a golden cloud around its earthly idol, until the woman becomes goddess or angel,

His publisher was sanguine, and anticipated an immediate success for a book which was not quite as other books, a book that had thought and deep feeling. The author of "*Life and Time*," a collection of articles that had been greatly read and discussed, was sure of a public. "*An Angel of Mercy*" would extend the area of his admirers, and was likely to achieve a wide popularity.

Desmond spent the whole morning, after his established custom, in his study, occupied with letters and accounts. There were always letters to write, if it were only to reply with civil brevity to the secretaries of innumerable charities and philanthropic schemes, who appealed to Mrs. Warden with a pertinacity which argued a belief that thirty thousand a

year was wealth as inexhaustible as the fairy cap of Fortunatus or the gold-creating power of Midas. The amanuensis had brought order into a list of subscriptions that had been wild and chaotic. The worthy charities received much larger contributions, and all the tricky schemes for getting money out of the public pocket had been ruled out with a blue pencil that was merciless to the swindling philanthropist.

It was only in the afternoon in the garden, or at tea in the drawing-room or library, that he joined the two girls, when he usually found Mrs. Lavington on the premises.

"I was so touched by what you said about these dear children, and I have strained a point to come in every day," she told Desmond in confidence, and in her protecting presence, safe from the invidious comments of prying neighbours, he could revel in the society he loved.

Leonard Penroyal appeared unexpectedly one afternoon, and his attentions to Muriel, and her appreciation of them, were sufficiently marked to make Desmond quite easy as to the soundness of a heart that it had been his privilege to awaken to the music of love. Leonard's attentions were of the sportive and half mocking kind that a clever young man, who thinks himself older and wiser than he is, loves to bestow upon a very young girl; but the fact that his fancy was caught by the damsel's charms was perfectly apparent to the lookers on.

Desmond rejoiced, and Vera was glad, and Mrs. Lavington's mind was relieved, as she had feared that the hireling secretary might carry off the heiress.

Leonard Penroyal might not be rich, but he would be the tenth baronet, and, in Mrs. Lavington's opinion, when that had been said all was said.

It was a week after the day of panic, and the specialist's evening visit had come to an end. Mrs.

Warden's progress had been steady. Improvement had been gradual and slow, but from the hour of her wild outburst there had been no set-back, and no occasion to summon Sir Julius before his appointed time. The precautionary measures which he had ordered had been rigidly maintained. Dr. Wilmot's assistant had occupied Mrs. Warden's sitting-room every night, a light sleeper, on guard against a possible intruder. The long windows opening on the balcony had been locked at night. Muriel had been allowed to see her grandmother twice a day, and to sit by her pillow and talk to her, but always under the eye of the nurse. Desmond had not seen the patient since the day when she conjured him to guard her from her enemy. She had sent him friendly messages by Muriel, and she had "Life and Time" on her bedside table.

Seven o'clock was Sir Julius Martley's hour, and Desmond waited to see him.

"I shall be in the billiard-room," he told Muriel, "and I should like to see the doctors when they come downstairs, if you will let me."

"Of course you must see them," she answered. "You are the son of the house now Randolph is away. I had a scrap of a letter from him this morning, hardly legible; just to say he was glad dear Gran was picking up her crumbs. He always uses vulgar expressions, but who can wonder? With such a stepmother!"

Desmond sat by the billiard-room fire with a volume of Carlyle's essays on his knee, but with no power to fix his mind upon the page. He wondered what the great man from Harley Street would say when he came downstairs. Had he given credence to the patient's statement; or were the precautions that he had ordered intended only to soothe and reassure Muriel? The fact that from the hour of Randolph's departure, or rather of his exclusion from the patient's rooms, the cruel symptoms had been

ameliorated, was a fact strange enough to startle any doctor from the phlegmatic acceptance of the course of an illness that, to the lay mind, seems the inevitable attitude of a doctor whose patient is dying by poison. It seems only at the eleventh hour, when the victim is moribund, that the tapioca pudding or the cup of arrowroot becomes an object of suspicion.

The two doctors went to the drawing-room, where Muriel was waiting for them; and they made her happy by the assurance that her grandmother was now on the high road to recovery, and might be able to go to Torquay or Bournemouth in a fortnight; and then Sir Julius went across the hall to the billiard-room, leaving Wilmot with the two girls.

"Miss Hammond told me you would like to see me," he said to Desmond, "and I wanted to see you. Mrs. Warden tells me that she has the utmost confidence in your good sense and your integrity. She tells me that she has a warm regard for you, although she has known you less than a year."

"Mrs. Warden has a very kind heart, and she is the—one of the—most liberal-minded women I every knew, or read of."

"She is impulsive, no doubt, a woman of quick feeling and affectionate nature. But the author of 'Life and Time' needs no voucher. His character is in his book."

"I feel proud that you should have read my poor book."

"I have read you with delight. Hard-worked doctors are omnivorous readers. We must have something to take the taste of the medical journals out of our mouths. But we have something more serious than literature to talk about. Mrs. Warden's grandson has left the house, I am told?"

"He went the morning after your last visit."

"He ought never to be allowed to come back to

this house, or to any house in which Mrs. Warden is living. That young man belongs to the criminal class, Mr. Desmond ; and it was only the instinct of our patient that saved him from becoming a murderer. He is to all intents and purposes a murderer."

" Do you mean that Mrs. Warden's illness was the effect of poison—from the beginning ? "

" I have no doubt about it. When once suspicion was aroused, it was not very difficult to make sure of the fact, and I may say that Wilmot and I have made it a certainty. The illness from which our patient suffered was never a natural illness—it was induced by small doses of arsenic, administered with diabolical ingenuity—since the poisoner worked in such a manner as to give the malady an intermittent character, and so hoodwink that poor lady's doctor."

" But," hesitated Desmond, " ought not— —"

Sir Julius caught him up quickly.

" Ought not Wilmot to have found out, ought not I to have found out, what was being done ? Well, yes, perhaps we ought to have suspected mischief before the patient gave us the clue. But you have to remember that the symptoms of gastric catarrh so closely resemble the symptoms of arsenical poisoning that unless there is something in the surrounding circumstances to suggest foul play a doctor may be easily deceived. And what were the surroundings here ? Could there be a domestic atmosphere less likely to suggest attempted murder ? Here was a benevolent old lady, with a grandson and granddaughter, who might naturally be supposed to love her. Here was the home of an affectionate family, with wealth and luxury and all things that make for content of mind. Where could be the incentive to crime in such a household ? I think in such circumstances Wilmot may be forgiven for a certain amount of blindness to the possibilities of the case."

"And you are sure now that there was an attempt at poison?"

"A deliberate and persistent attempt—an attempt so boldly carried out, towards the last, that if suspicion had *not* been aroused, our patient might have slipped through our fingers. She was very low when I saw her last week. A day or two more might have been fatal."

"And you are sure of poison?"

"Perfectly sure. We have found traces of arsenic."

"Why do you suspect her grandson?"

"I saw his face when there was suspicion in the air. I want no further evidence. If I found a dying man and saw a cobra gliding away under his tent, I could not be more sure of snake bite. And then I conclude this young man would profit by his grandmother's death?"

"Yes, he would profit considerably. She told him that she had left him half her fortune."

"She told him! Poor soul! And no doubt he was in want of money? That kind of young man is always hard up."

"I know he wanted money—badly."

"And he took a short cut to get it. He must never come into this house again. You must use your intelligence and your influence with Mrs. Warden to prevent that; and when she is strong enough to hear it she will have to be told the truth."

"Is that necessary?"

"Of course it is. Would you allow a baffled murderer to be enriched by his intended victim? There would be no safety for that good woman if she were not warned against the domestic traitor."

"It must have been difficult for him to continue his horrible work after the nurses came," Desmond said.

"Hazardous—but not difficult. He had easy

access to the room where the patient's drinks were kept. He could come by the balcony and through the window at any hour of the night, and would be sure of not meeting anyone. A night light was kept burning. He could see if the coast was clear before he opened the window; indeed I understand that one of the casements was generally kept ajar for ventilation."

"And he put his dose of arsenic into the glass jug?"

"Not powdered arsenic—that would have left a sediment. He must have used *liquor arsenicalis*."

"But how did he get the poison? Would not that be difficult?"

"Troublesome, no doubt. But a man who is capable of murder is a kind of man who can take trouble. He may have had some medical friend—or he may have been friendly with some naturalist who would use arsenic for preserving specimens—birds or reptiles. There are ways of circumventing the laws that are made to protect human life."

"It is horrible to think that he should be such a wretch. Muriel's brother! She has such a sweet nature, so candid, so kind."

"Such differences are strange, no doubt."

"From the hour I first saw him, when he came for the shooting at the beginning of October, I was prejudiced against him. He was inclined to be insolent, resenting Mrs. Warden's kindness to me, but it was something more than his bad manners that influenced me. It was something more subtle. I felt that he was dangerous."

"There are such instincts. I am told that you have been writing a novel. I believe that men who cultivate the imaginative faculty are likely to possess powers altogether distinct from the reasoning capacity. Men like me have to get at facts by hard-headed logic, while you poets and romancers jump at the truth without knowing how

you do it. I am so fully assured of this young man's guilt that had the circumstances been different I should have felt it my duty to submit the facts to the police ; but in a large household it would be almost impossible to bring the crime home to any one person, since all could have access to the room where the patient's drinks were kept. There are twelve indoor servants, I am told. Including Miss Hammond, her brother, yourself, and the nurses, there were seventeen people in the house daily. It would seem difficult among such a number to put your finger upon the criminal. We may know that this young man had a strong motive for attempting Mrs. Warden's life, but the strongest motive wouldn't bring the crime home to him without confirmatory evidence. But you and I know that he is guilty ; and it is our duty to warn his intended victim."

" It will be very painful."

" No doubt, but the good lady's distress of mind is a small thing compared with her life, which has been endangered, seriously endangered, by this man. If he should show himself here before she has been told, it will be your duty to shut him out of the house. You can tell him that you are acting on my instructions. He will know what that means."

Desmond went with Sir Julius to the brougham in which he was to be driven to the station. Dr. Wilmot had been detained in the drawing-room all the time, Muriel having innumerable questions to ask about the cherished patient. It was ineffable bliss to know that her recovery was now only a question of good nursing. But were they sure that either Bournemouth or Torquay would do ? Was not Bournemouth colder than Torquay ? Dr. Wilmot assured her that any sheltered watering-place on the south-west coast would do. Mrs. Warden required the change only as a fillip. Lungs and heart were in good order. She ought to be as strong as she had

ever been after a month by the sea, where she could spend most of her time in the open air.

Muriel insisted upon Desmond's staying to dinner, to celebrate the dear Grannie's convalescence. The Vicarage people were coming, including the eldest Miss Lavington, who was considered very pretty, "by people who like red hair," Muriel added deprecatingly, seeing mockery in Desmond's countenance, for Miss Lavington, sooth to say, was far from lovely, having to apologize for a snub nose and a clumsy mouth in addition to her fiery locks; but, on the other hand, as her mother's intimate friends agreed, she had a figure, and with such a figure a girl ought to marry well.

Happily Mrs. Lavington had never heard the vulgar jest of the servants' hall to the effect that Miss Lavington was an angel to follow, and—something uncomplimentary—to meet.

"Grannie told me to ask them to dinner, as Mrs. Lavington has been so kind in dropping in of an afternoon."

"It must be a relief to sit in this quiet room after a meeting," said Vera, "and she seems always to have come from a meeting. I feel ashamed to think how much less parish work I had on the moor. The farms lie far apart. I used to ride about on my dear pony, and call upon the people; and there was the Sunday school, which I loved, with the clean chubby-cheeked children who used to tramp from ever so far off, bringing their pasties with them."

Muriel required to be told that a pasty was a primitive kind of meat pie, mostly potato, and that it was the children's dinner.

For Desmond it was a night in Paradise, but, alas, a night of farewell, for Vera was to leave Lorriford early the next morning, happy in the knowledge that she left a house whence the Shadow had been banished, a house where all seemed gladness.

There was no doubt now as to the invalid's pro-

gress. Mrs. Warden was pronounced well enough to spend an hour in her morning-room, and it was hoped she might come downstairs on the following Sunday. The watch-dog from Dr. Wilmot's surgery was no longer required. The doctors had no farther apprehension of evil.

"You see it must have been the crisis," Muriel insisted, referring to her grandmother's sudden panic on that tragic morning.

Desmond was glad that no cloud of suspicion had crossed her bright young mind, and he hoped that the horror that Mrs. Warden would have to know need never be revealed to Muriel. Yet there was here a difficulty, for if in years to come Muriel became the sole possessor of her grandmother's fortune how would she defend herself from a brother who might know himself her heir-at-law? Again the stealthy foot might creep through the night silence, the stealthy hand might drop death into the innocent drink, and the attempt that had failed with the grandmother might succeed with the grand-daughter.

The peril of ignorance would be too great, Desmond thought. Cruel as it might seem to tell her the dark secret of her brother's life, she would have to be told.

Meanwhile the days went on, days of supreme content, for Mrs. Warden's convalescence knew no check. She was in the drawing-room on Sunday afternoon, seated in her favourite chair, with Desmond's book on the table at her side, among those devotional books, the seventeenth century divines, whose grave and lengthy discourses she liked to read on Sunday.

She was enchanted with her recovered liberty.

"No words can describe how weary I was of my room, and even of those two conscientious nurses," she told Mrs. Lavington, who had made a point of coming to tea on this particular afternoon. "And

then I had to be fed up. That's what the doctors call it. It you have ever been fed up, you know it means being given every kind of food that you loathe, and denied everything that you like. However, I have survived it," she said, laughing, " and now I am a prisoner on parole, and you can give me another cup of tea, Muriel."

" Oh, Grannie, isn't that wrong ? Nurse Dakin said one cup, weak, and with plenty of milk."

" Atrocious stuff ! I insist upon having a cup of proper tea. I shan't go to Bournemouth with you, Muriel, if you show the cloven foot. I won't be tyrannized over."

## CHAPTER XXII.

THE next morning's post brought Desmond an unexpected joy! A letter from Vera, the first! He knew her writing, with its most trivial details, every curve, every stroke, for in his "In Memoriam," an Eton prize, he had a list of school-children's names that she had written for the Christmas-tree, a stolen document that he had made a marker in one of his most precious books.

Why had she written to him? Was it for good or evil? His heart sank as horrible possibilities presented themselves. It might be a letter of doom.

He tore open the envelope, in a fever of agitation, and found the briefest of little notes, on such thick paper that it had indicated a budget. It was an innocent little note of a few lines—an invitation to dinner.

"Foxcose.

"Sunday evening.

"DEAR MR. DESMOND,—My father has read 'Life and Time' with much interest, and he is anxious to know the author. He hopes you will be good enough to dine with us at eight o'clock next Thursday, when he expects Professor Greenhead, the famous palæontologist, whom you may like to meet.

"Yours very faithfully,

"VERA PENROYAL."

He kissed the little letter, so neatly and daintily

written upon paper that exhaled an odour of violets.

And he had feared to open the envelope, lest an adder should leap out of it and sting him to death. He laughed at himself, in his sudden gladness. How could he have wronged her by the thought that she could be capricious or unkind? She would be true to him with a grand courage, though father and friends fought against him tooth and nail. He was *her* convict, the man she had saved from despair.

He was enraptured at the idea of sitting at meat with her father, and finding out what manner of man he was, whereby he might measure the chiefest of the difficulties he had to overcome. All that his daughter had ever said of Sir Emanuel suggested a creature of exceeding gentleness, absorbed in his particular hobby, a student, taking a placid view of life from his chimney corner, and absolutely indifferent to the glories of our rank and state. But there was the chance that although thus careless of worldly splendours he might have exacting ideas about character and good name. He might be one of those placid people who can be unconquerably obstinate, who can stop their ears against the voice of reason, and cleave to their own opinion with an amiable smile.

Time crept at a snail's pace between Monday and Thursday, though all was happiness at Lorringford, where every day marked progress in Mrs. Warden's convalescence. On the first sunny morning after her Sunday afternoon tea she was allowed to make a tour of the gardens in a bath chair, and to converse with Cobb, who repeated every statement several times, after the manner of his class, and who boasted of the things he had done during her illness.

"I knew you would like to see the houses in perfection when you got about again, ma'am," he said;

" and you'll be glad to know that I took a first prize for stove plants at Reading last week, and a first and second for azaleas and cyclamen, in the single class. I've mentioned it to Mr. Desmond, and I hope he'll see his way to making some improvement in my circumstances, having a growing family, and my eldest girl at a genteel boarding-school."

" Poor Cobb," said Mrs. Warden. " Well, I'll ask Mr. Desmond to consider your merits. But I really can't see that I'm any better off for your prize-taking, and I'm told that the last quarter's bill for coke was tremendous."

" A literary gentleman can't be expected to know much about high-class horticulture," Cobb remarked, with wounded pride; " but a lady like yourself, which you had a fine place in Hertfordshire, must be puffickly aware that a gardener who sweeps the board at a county show reflecks credit upon any establishment."

Next day the convalescent was allowed to take a drive in an open landau, in the sunny forenoon, Muriel sitting by her Grannie's side, and cherishing her with tender care, now adjusting the sable rug, anon rearranging the down pillows, while Desmond sat opposite, having been asked to show Mrs. Warden certain cottages on her estate which needed alteration and expansion.

" It's a delightful world when one comes back to it after spending five weeks in prison," she said joyously.

Desmond agreed with a smile, wondering how those rural lanes, and grassy banks starred with the celandine's pale gold, would have appeared to her after a captivity of five years.

There was only one cloud in the domestic sky during these happy days of convalescence, a cloud no bigger than a man's hand, but with the poten-

tiality of expansion, since the cloud concerned Randolph.

Except his scrap of a letter, and one brief telegram, he had made no sign since his hasty departure from Lorringford nearly a month before.

Mrs. Warden was offended, and Muriel began to be unhappy, troubled with vague fears about her brother, although she knew by long experience that he hardly ever took the trouble to write to her, and that he seldom wrote to his grandmother unless he wanted money. But then his normal condition was to want money, and his letters to that effect had not been few and far between. However his letter began, with whatever expressions of affectionate concern about his grandmother's health and general well-being, the fertility of her woods and farms, the beauty of her gardens, the abundance of birds in her preserves, it rarely ended without an appeal to her purse.

Mrs. Warden asked to see his telegram, sent three days after he left Lorringford.

“Glad Grannie is going on well. Give her my love, and wire further improvement.—RANDOLPH.”

The message came from South Kensington, and Mrs. Warden opined that he was living under his father's roof. She was offended at his leaving her house while she was lying dangerously ill, and was surprised at his not giving any explanation.

“I understood that he would stay here until he sailed for the Cape,” she said, “only going to London for his outfit, a business of a few days. You must have heard him say that he had better health here than at Daneborough Gardens, and I don't think there can be any attraction for him in his father's surroundings.”

“He has always declared that his stepmother made home hateful,” Muriel said disconsolately.

"I'm afraid he must have fallen into dissipated habits, and that he is altogether in a bad way," said Mrs. Warden.

"Dearest Grannie, don't say that of your only grandson. I know Randolph's ways are not quite satisfactory. That disappointment about the Army soured him a little. It was hard to lose his chance through his father's bad management."

"Who knows whether it was his father's fault ? It may have been his own idleness."

"No, no ; it was all the tutor's fault, a wretched man not up to the work. His father ought to have known better."

This conversation occurred in Desmond's hearing. He, too, had wondered what Randolph was doing, what evil use he was making of Satan's luck.

Some unexpected information upon this subject came into his hands on his way to Foxcose, and the dinner-party in fairyland.

The house where she lived could be nothing but a fairy palace. He recalled the pale mists of that November evening, the lighted windows shining through the grey, the dear house she lived in, so near but so impossible ; and he remembered how it was a joy even to walk about and look at those white walls and gleaming windows and think that she was there. And to-night he was to sit in her drawing-room, and look upon the things she loved, the piano, the books, the flowers, the pictures that smiled at her from the lamplit walls.

Full of such thoughts, he read a paragraph here and there in an evening paper he had bought at Penlow, and so fell upon Randolph Hammond's name in a list of more or less notorious punters at Monte Carlo.

Nothing was more natural than that he should have carried his stolen money to the *trente et quarante* table, the famous gold saloon, where he could ruffle it with the best and the worst company.

His enchantress was with him, most likely, the desire of his heart, for whose sake it was a small thing to have become a thief, after he had been almost a successful murderer. He had found his way to the world's gaming-table, the Temple of Chance in a garden of beauty, amidst all that is fairest in earth and sky, the gay and gaudy temple where lives are ruined and hearts break at the turn of the wheel, where the fortunes that are won never seem to do the winner any good, and where the fortunes that are lost are registered by the revolver or the morphia needle.

How long would the stolen money last him in that paradise of fools? What vicissitudes of fortune would he suffer? How often would his wealth be doubled, trebled, multiplied by ten, twenty, forty, before the black day came when he would see the last thousand-franc note swept up by the croupier's wooden rake?

Desmond had neither leisure nor inclination to meditate upon Randolph's fate. The train stopped, and he sprang into the fly that was to carry him to Foxcopsis. He passed the lighted shop windows that had mocked his hopes last November. Tonight they smiled at him with friendly radiance, lamps that sparkled and laughed through the March grey. He was going to cross that dear threshold, an invited guest. *She* had bidden him. This friendly little dinner was perhaps her contriving. She wanted him to ingratiate himself into her father's favour, to win his regard if possible, before he appeared as a lover, before those terrible antecedents had to be confessed.

A quarter of an hour's drive brought him to the white gate. All the windows were lighted, as if for a festival. The hall was full of spring flowers, the warm air was scented with jonquils and violets, subtle sweetness that breathed round him as he entered the house, like a promise of joy. The long,

low drawing-room looked the ideal room for prettiness and comfort, a gaily burning fire at each end, bright brass fenders, hedge-sparrow walls adorned with eighteenth-century prints, flowers and china on every table and in every corner, a friendly room that smiled upon the stranger guest.

Sir Emanuel's welcome was all cordiality. He declared himself delighted to know a writer whose views and opinions had greatly interested him.

"There is only one thing that I note with regret," he said blandly. "Among so wide a survey of life as your various themes denote, I do not find a reverence for the past. I fear that old things have little charm for you."

"Indeed, Sir Emanuel, I am deeply interested in the history of men and cities."

"Cities, men, yes. Cities! Modern cities! Rome, Paris, Vienna!"

"I assure you, Sir Emanuel, I am not so narrow-minded as to limit my interest to modern cities. I am as keenly interested in Gnossos as in Paris!"

"Pshaw, my dear sir, Gnossos is modern, contemptibly modern; a place of yesterday, measured against the antiquity of man. Hannibal, Cæsar, William the Conqueror? As a writer—a student of manners, those no doubt interest you. It is modern men you care about, the history of the world since men wore chain-armour and killed each other with Toledo swords; the age of purple and fine linen, pomp and parade. The men who catch your romantic fancy are essentially modern—creatures of yesterday. But what of man before manners? What of primeval man, the contemporary of the Mastodon? What of man fifty thousand, or a hundred and fifty thousand, years before gunpowder and the printing press were invented? What of his history, what of the wars of the Stone Age, the infant civilization of the

Bronze Age, the dawning grandeur of the Iron Age? Have those great subjects no charm for you? Are you content to accept the sophisticated creature of the last two thousand years, and to know nothing of him who lived and fought and loved and suffered twenty, forty, a hundred thousand years ago?"

Sir Emanuel was letting his hobby run away with him, relying on Desmond's acute mind as prepared to take fire at the first suggestion of the Stone Age; but, as Desmond was a lover first and an author afterwards, his eyes and thoughts had wandered towards Vera, who was at the farther end of the room, talking to a girl and a young man whom he recognized as the Romeo of last November, the eligible and much sought-after Sir Harry Bennington.

He was just able to collect his wits in time to reply to his host.

"No man with a ray of intelligence could fail to be interested in the problem of prehistoric man," he said; "but the subject is too vast for a trifler to handle."

"You are no trifler, Mr. Desmond. There are evidences of thought in your book, thought which is to me far more precious than the wit and fancy that have attracted a lighter class of readers. But I grant the theme is vast, too vast for a single lifetime. Ah, here is my dear old friend, who has devoted the best part of his eighty years to pre-Adamite history."

The butler announced Professor Greenhead, and an old man sidled into the room, and shook hands with his host. He had an amiable countenance and large blue eyes, a parchment complexion and greenish-grey hair worn long enough to fall upon the shining silk collar of his antique dress-coat. Man and clothes had an air of ages long gone by, and if one could conceive a pre-glacial civilization, when man first assumed dress-clothes, one might have

fancied Professor Greenhead a relic of that dim beginning of human history.

This courteous fossil smiled blandly when Desmond was introduced to him, but with a far-off look, as if divided by at least one geological formation from any modern young man.

There was a marked contrast between the two friends ; Sir Emanuel, well set-up and vigorous, with a head and figure that would have done for a Venetian Doge, and the shoulders and limbs of a man who had tramped the moor and followed the hounds afoot, the Professor marked by that indescribable dry-as-dust and anaemic aspect of the man who hates open air.

Desmond slipped away to the other end of the room, after a gracious word or two from the octogenarian, and shook hands with Vera, whose eyes smiled sweet welcome to the friendly hearth.

Sir Harry, standing in front of the fire, and looking more at home than Desmond liked to see, deigned to remember having met him at the Lorriford ball.

“And I think you came to see our show,” he added graciously. “Jolly good show, wasn’t it, for amateurs ? But with such a Juliet ! I begin to think that Shakespeare’s the boy for amateurs, don’t you know ? The audience listen to the fine language, and ain’t too critical about the acting. I’ve been thinkin’ about Shylock—deuced good part—Shylock.”

“No, no, no,” Vera cried ; “there has been only one Shylock since Edmund Kean. Shylock is dead.”

“Talks as if she’d seen old Kean, don’t she ? ” said Sir Harry, addressing a portly matron in myrtle green velvet and sable.

The green velvet matron was Lady Mountclarges, the same portly personage for whom Desmond had catered at Mrs. Stanmore’s supper, and on this

occasion her pretty and very juvenile daughter fell to his lot.

"I'm charmed to meet you again, though I don't suppose you remember me at Mrs. Stanmore's party," she told him, as they went to the dining-room, following Sir Emanuel and the damsel's expansive mother. "I've been reading your book, and I think it too lovely for words. Mother raves about it. And we are dying to read your novel—do tell me when it will be out."

Desmond gave the desired information, modestly, wishing the dear girl would talk of anything else.

"‘Angelic Mercies.’ How sweet! But it sounds rather like a religious book.”

Desmond assured her that there was not a grain of religion in it.

"I'm rather glad of that. But I hope it isn't one of those improper novels that I'm not allowed to read."

The table was round, which gave the little party a certain cosiness, and made the odd number less noticeable. The Professor, for whom there was no mate, sat between Desmond and Vera, who had Sir Harry on her left. Sir Emanuel had a noble carelessness as to the arrangement of a dinner-table, and had invited the guardsman that afternoon, on meeting him in the street.

"We are not living in Noah's Ark," he said, when Vera suggested that it was better to have the sexes evenly matched.

Sir Emanuel addressed his attentions to Lady Mountclarges' girl during the soup and sherry. Sir Emanuel admired pretty girls, in his mild way, and liked to encourage them. He inquired how she had been amusing herself of late, and she replied that her hockey club had been having some very good matches. Sir Emanuel could not pretend to know anything about hockey, but on the game being

described, he opined that it was in the nature of that fine old Persian sport which Army men were fond of—polo.

“ That’s just what it is—polo without ponies ! ”

“ Really ? Does not that seem tame, a something wanting ? ”

No ! Miss Mountclarges thought that hockey was better than polo, because in polo no man could always rely upon his pony, while every girl of spirit could be sure of her own legs.

Having made this five minutes’ sacrifice to courtesy, Sir Emanuel addressed himself to Desmond.

“ I wonder whether you know our Moor ? ” Sir Emanuel asked. “ It is a page of British history which I am sure would interest you.”

Desmond confessed that Dartmoor was a *terra incognita* to him.

“ What ! Have you never been there ? ”

He heard Vera stumble confusedly in the midst of her talk with Sir Harry, and he glanced at her with a reassuring smile.

“ I crossed the Moor once.”

“ On a walking tour, I hope ? That is the best way to see Dartmoor ! ”

“ Yes, I was on foot, but I was too hurried to enjoy the beauty of the district.”

“ Or its vestiges of primitive life, its hut circles and granite sepulchres, its shrines of Baal, its evidences of mysterious worship and mysterious customs, its dolmens and triple stone circles,” pursued Sir Emanuel, fairly mounted on his hobby and riding fast, when the Professor interrupted him, and left Desmond free to listen to Vera and Sir Harry, who seemed to have opinions and ideas in common, in spite of the guardsman’s sloping chin.

The Professor did not believe in the shrines of Baal, and he was wanting in reverence for the Druids. He accepted the Moor as a British stronghold when

the rest of our island was mostly Anglo-Saxon ; and he would allow authenticity to Sir Emanuel's extensive collection of implements of use and warfare in flint and bronze. And now the conversation became a battle of opinions between the host and the Professor, with occasional appeals from Sir Emanuel to Desmond, since he could not believe that any young man with a taste for letters could be indifferent to primitive man, or ignorant of the revelations of immeasurable antiquity which had illuminated the mid-Victoran era.

Vainly did Desmond try to keep his ear and his attention fixed upon the antiquary and his friend, as they argued upon details that the two had discussed with the same fire and the same asperity on innumerable occasions. He was distracted by wanting to know what Vera was saying to Sir Harry, and why their conversation seemed so pleasant to them both.

Oh, now the talk was about hunting ! He was urging her to let her father buy her a hunter or two, against next season. He protested that it was too bad that she had let a winter slip by without riding to hounds. And presently he was telling her about a toy bull-dog that he wanted her to accept from him. He had given it to a cousin in Warwickshire who had proved herself unworthy of so precious a beast, and had offered to return it to the donor : a dog that had earned his weight in gold in first prizes ; a thing of beauty, and with a heavenly disposition.

She liked to hear about the bull-dog, and they laughed together gaily at Sir Harry's anecdotes of the animal's cleverness and bad behaviour to people who didn't understand him. He was a dog of warm affections, and his dislikings were even stronger than his likings. And then Vera told Sir Harry that no dog could ever be admitted into Foxcopse while she had her adorable fox terrier, Nick ;

and she hoped Nick would become a canine Methuselah.

A swift flash of eyes that danced with mirth told Desmond that Nick was the dog that had barked at him in the Vicarage yard, and that one glance rendered him incompetent to reply sanely to Sir Emanuel's inquiry into his acquaintance with the evidences of primeval man in the valley of the Somme.

The most distracting feature of the antediluvian conversation was the rapidity with which the Professor and his friend shifted the scene of their discussion. Scenes and periods changed with bewildering swiftness. Now they were talking of palæolithic man, of fifty thousand years ago; and now of neolithic man, whose habits and ways were superior to the customs of some existing savages, and who might be thought of as a distinctly modern person. Two minutes ago they were groping in a cave at Brixham in Devonshire; and now they were fathoms deep in the gravels of the Somme valley, and in another minute, while Sir Harry, with tactless insistence, was still pressing his toy bull-dog, they were in the delta of the Mississippi, from which locality Sir Emanuel sprung the Natchez man upon Desmond, as a personage with whom he could not fail to be acquainted.

Natchez! The name suggested a Spanish fiddler; and Desmond was on the point of disgracing himself by an insane remark about the artist's popularity in the States, when an eager interruption of the Professor informed him that the man from Natchez had only become known to the modern world in his fossilized condition, and was supposed to be of immeasurable antiquity, any number of years you fancied in thousands or tens of thousands.

Desmond was almost glad when there came the sudden rustle of silk and chiffon, and Vera's bright face vanished from the table, since he would now be

able to rivet his attention upon the ways of men who had lived with mammoths and hobnobbed with cave bears, and cut their food with flint knives, and killed each other with flint arrow-heads. It was essential to his hopes that he should please Sir Emanuel, and he took perhaps the safest road to the kind old man's favour by confessing his superficial acquaintance with the wonders that geology had revealed to the modern world, and by owning that his personal interest in the past had not gone farther than the tomb of Agamemnon at Mycenæ, or the recent discoveries in Crete.

Sir Emanuel was delighted. Here was no sceptic, but a mind prepared to receive enlightenment, a child-like eagerness for admittance into unknown worlds.

He began a monologue that lasted over half an hour, broken only by an occasional intelligent question from the neophyte, and during which the Professor fell asleep, while Sir Harry, after a third cigarette, was mean enough to sneak away to the drawing-room.

Later, during the old-fashioned but delightful appearance of a ten o'clock tea-tray, Vera had a confidential moment with Desmond.

“My father is quite charmed with your interest in his hobby,” she told him.

“I only feared he would be disgusted at my ignorance.”

“No, no; he is enchanted to find a clever man who brings a fresh mind to his favourite study. I have no doubt he has been talking to you very much as he used to talk to my brother and me when we were children, when we were as fond of his flint and bronze people as other children are of Cinderella and Rumplestiltskin.”

“I hope you had Cinderella and Rumplestiltskin as well as the bronze people.”

“Oh, yes, our nice governess took care of that;

but we liked the men who lived with mammoths and mastodons even better than the fairies, for the dear father's sake."

There was only a quarter of an hour in the drawing-room before the large velvet lady took her girl away and gave the signal for Sir Harry and Desmond to take leave. The old Professor and his host would repair to the library and sit there till the small hours.

"You must come and see us again," Sir Emanuel told Desmond, as they shook hands. "You must come often. I can tell you things about our first ancestors that you might like to embody in a novel."

He was to go there again, to go often! The fairy palace had opened its magical doors as hospitably as fairy palaces are wont to do for the wandering prince or peasant; and here there was no wicked enchanter, no hidden snare for the wanderer to fear.

This was the palace "the name whereof was Beautiful."

## CHAPTER XXIII.

BEFORE he could pay his second visit to that enchanted house where his love lived, Desmond was sent away from her vicinity upon an errand of duty.

Mrs. Warden and Muriel had both taken it into their heads to be anxious about Randolph. No word had come from him since that one wretched little scrawl posted in London, and Muriel's telegrams and letters addressed both to his club and to her father's house had brought no answer. Mrs. Warden had written to Captain Hammond, a person whom she always kept at arm's length, and he had replied that he had not seen his son since Christmas.

"He must have some other home in London," she said to Desmond, when they two were alone, "some home he is ashamed of. I have suspected lately that there must be something wrong in his life, some mysterious drain for his money. I really did not know how much I had given him last year, till you made me go through my pass-book with you."

"It was officious, perhaps, on my part. I ought not to have worried you. But it would not have been business-like to take the banker's account for granted."

"No, of course not. You were quite right. I'm afraid that young man was born to give me trouble."

Desmond was silent, thinking sadly of the revelation that Sir Julius Martley had to make to her,

later on, after the restful weeks at Bournemouth had restored her to her normal health.

He told her that he had seen her grandson's name among the visitors at Monte Carlo.

"How on earth can he stand the expense of Monte Carlo? He has had nothing from me since Christmas?"

"He may have gone with some rich friend—or he may have won money at the tables."

"Wretched young man. Any money he comes by in that way will do him more harm than good."

Muriel was becoming really unhappy about her brother, and her alarm was intensified when Desmond told her that the missing man was in all probability enjoying his life under brighter skies than even the April blue above Lorringford. She had a fixed idea of Monte Carlo as a place where a young man either broke the bank or shot himself in the darkness of the midnight gardens.

"I shall be utterly miserable at Bournemouth unless I know that he is alive and in decent company," she said piteously, whereupon Desmond offered to go to London and do his best to hunt out Randolph, and even to follow him to Monte Carlo if necessary, provided Mrs. Warden cared to dispense with his services for a week or so. He made this offer somewhat reluctantly, having such strong reasons for wishing to stay where he was.

"I don't think Grannie will mind. We are going to Bournemouth on Monday, and her letters would have to wait, anyhow. Besides, this is a matter of life and death," Muriel said, being intense in all things.

"Then, subject to her approval, I will go. But before I leave this house I must ask you to promise me something."

"From your way of speaking, it must be something serious."

“Yes, it is serious. I want you to promise me that in the event of your brother coming, or offering to come, here, or to Bournemouth, during my absence, you will not allow him to remain longer than it will take you to tell him that he must go. He must never again live—not for a day, not for an hour, in any house where your grandmother lives. He has forfeited the right to be under the same roof with her.”

“Do you mean that he has done something dreadful; something that you know?”

“Yes, he has done something that I know, something that makes him unworthy of your affection, something that ought to make him a stranger to you for ever.”

“I can’t imagine anything he could do bad enough for that. I think you must judge him very cruelly—unjustly even. I know that young men do foolish things—get into bad company—spend too much money; but Grannie is too kind and generous not to forgive such sins as those. And Randolph’s sin cannot be worse than that.”

“You will know by and by what kind of sin it is—and though you may be sorry for him because he is your brother, sorry that it should be your lot to have such a brother, you will acknowledge the justice of what I have said to-day. He must not be admitted to your grandmother’s house.”

“I shall never cease to think you cruel and unjust,” Muriel answered angrily.

“Will you give me your promise? I don’t think your brother will put you to the test; but I cannot leave this house unless I have your promise.”

“Very well, I promise. But if Randolph does come and I have to forbid him the house I will never forgive you.”

“You will forgive me when you know all.”

Desmond spent a sunny hour at Foxcose on the

following afternoon, and was introduced to Nick, the fox terrier. He remembered the white dog in the dim grey night, the exasperated dog, straining madly at his chain and piercing the sky with his shrill bark. Nick, at large and enjoying afternoon tea, was quite a different dog, inclined at once to friendship, a dog who jumped upon his knees and licked his face, and whose endearments he returned, pleased to be approved by *her* dog. Perhaps Nick ought to stand first as his friend in trouble, for without that tempestuous barking, Vera would not have known that her convict had come.

Sir Emanuel was at home, and insisted upon taking Desmond to his library, where besides a respectable collection of books, mostly "Transactions" of some kind or other, there were innumerable drawers and shelves containing implements in flint and bronze and iron, and skulls and bones of men and animals, in the exhibition whereof Sir Emanuel was able to enlarge upon those evidences of the immeasurable past, that past in which beings of flesh and bone, and thinking brains and capable hands like his own, had lived among animals stranger than a fever dream.

It was his human brother that interested Sir Emanuel. The slow ascent from protoplasm to ape-like ancestor, and from ape-like ancestor upward to humanity left him cold. The stupendous labours of a Darwin were to his mind waste of time. He concerned himself little about the making of man. It was what man had made himself that he cared for.

Desmond listened to him with respectful attention, interested far more in the individual than in his discourse. He had been prepared to honour Vera's father, and even to love him, for Vera's sake, but in this mild old man he found a character of such rare sweetness and such rare detachment from all worldly considerations, that it would be almost

impossible to know him and not to love him. Absorbed in the records of a remote past, in the dim distance of immeasurable time, steeped in the poetry of the solitary scenes in which the greater part of his life had been spent, with a mind that had fed upon legend and fairy-tale, tradition and fantastic fancy, Sir Emanuel seemed to have lost all hold upon the meaner interests of modern men and women, the getting and spending that lay waste our powers.

Desmond fancied that a character so unlike the common herd was the result of long years spent in a romantic solitude far from all common and unworthy things, from sordid ambitions, trivial purposes, vulgar amusements, capricious fashions, the race for gold, the strife of parties. Purified and exalted in that rarefied atmosphere, safe from all contact with baseness, the man's mind and disposition had become childlike in simplicity and candour, not with the childishness of old age, but with the transparent candour of childhood in its bloom, quick in intelligence, eagerly interested in the simple things it loves.

From such a man Desmond might hope for understanding and sympathy such as no worldling would give. The worldling would look at the escaped convict from Society's point of view, and would say, "No daughter of mine shall marry a man who has been condemned to penal servitude." The worldling, even while inclined to believe him the victim of a mistaken verdict, would be inexorable in rejecting him as a son-in-law. But Desmond thought that this mild old man would be willing to look into his case, and if convinced that he had suffered unjustly, would not consider his conviction an indelible brand, would take him for what he was worth. The question was for him to prove that he was worth something; and it was promising to find that those expressions of thought and feeling in his collected essays which had won the favour of

essentially mundane critics had made a favourable impression upon this unsophisticated old man.

He spent more than an hour with Sir Emanuel in his museum, and Vera had vanished from the drawing-room when he went to retrieve his hat, and in the hope of seeing her again.

But his leave-taking was cheered by Sir Emanuel's cordial invitation to him to come again shortly and see the Dartmoor relics, which, though not claiming the honour of ages measureless to man, were interesting as bringing one in touch with the comparatively modern Britons.

"I hope you are not one of those people who pooh-pooh the Druids, and who pretend that our cromlechs and stone tables are nothing more than sepulchral monuments," he said as they parted.

"What, give up the Druids and their golden sickles for cutting mistletoe and their mighty circle at Stonehenge? Not for the world," said Desmond, determined to get a batch of books from the London library and steep himself in "Transactions" before his next visit to Foxcose.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

MRS. WARDEN and her grand-daughter left Lorrington on the following Monday, escorted by Desmond, who saw them seated in the Pulman car for Bournemouth, with every luxury that is possible for the traveller—easy chairs, luncheon, foot-warmers, newspapers and magazines—together with a sympathetic attendant, ready to anticipate their lightest wish and take care of their small luggage.

Muriel sternly refused to be beguiled by the magazines. Grannie might have them. They would be good for Grannie, whose mind ought not to be severely taxed during convalescence. But for herself Muriel had plenty of reading to get through while they were away. She had brought four new books upon science, books that Mr. Penroyal had been kind enough to get for her, and that came within the limits of her humble intelligence.

“I’m afraid they are a shade too simple, written down, don’t you know, with a contempt for the average intelligence,” she told Desmond. “However, I am content to learn the A B C of science—to begin at the beginning.”

“I believe that is the golden rule for all study,” said Desmond, “though so many of us shirk it.”

There was a certain coldness and aloofness in Muriel’s manner to Desmond that indicated her resentment at his denunciation of her brother, not

a beloved brother, but a brother she ought to love. She was angry with herself for not being more angry, for being able to hold discourse of any kind with a man who had told her that Randolph had to be banished for sins which could not be explained to her.

Mrs. Warden was in good spirits, and almost as well as she had ever been, but she owned to some anxiety about Randolph, as a drawback to her anticipated enjoyment of Bournemouth.

“When one hears nothing about a young man of that kind there is always the fear that he has got into mischief,” she said.

“Oh, Grannie! My only fear is that he is ill,” Muriel said reproachfully, as the great car crept slowly away, leaving Desmond on the platform.

The task before him was not an easy one. He had to satisfy the young man’s kindred by discovering where he was and what he was doing, and he had to satisfy himself upon the question of the young man’s guilt, before the time came for the revelation which must lead to his being disinherited, perhaps left penniless, or at best provided for by a pittance sufficient for daily bread.

After the evidence of poison had been attested by the doctors, Desmond felt very little doubt that Randolph was the poisoner, but he could not be certain of his guilt. Sir Julius had condemned the young man on his own impressions of character and temperament, relying on his trained judgment of countenance and manner. But facial expression and manner are not evidence, and Sir Julius might be mistaken. There was always Muriel’s hypothesis of madness to be considered. Some member of the household might be a homicidal lunatic, artful enough to appear sane, while attempting purposeless murder. The fact of Mrs. Warden’s recovery coinciding with Randolph’s disappearance was hardly

evidence against him, since the close watch upon the morning-room would baffle any member of the household, and the poisoner's work must have ceased from the moment doctors and nurses were on guard against the danger.

He wanted to be convinced of the young man's guilt before that dark tale was told, and in order to arrive at certainty he had to discover the means by which the poison had been obtained. Impotent as the law of the land may be to protect life from accidental or premeditated poison, it could not be easy for a layman to buy white arsenic or *liquor arsenicalis* in any perilous quantity. There must have been someone helping him ; and that unknown accomplice had to be found.

There was a special danger for Desmond in any attempt to follow Randolph to his chosen haunts, the danger of finding himself face to face with Mrs. Farrowgate, who would be sure to recognize him. She had recognized him in the lamp-lit street, though he must have been considerably changed from the man she had seen in the dock five years before. There could be no change in his appearance now from the man she had met in the street, except that his beard was better grown, and that his tranquil life of the last year had smoothed away some of the lines that penal servitude had written upon his face.

Mrs. Warden had given him a line of introduction to her son-in-law, since Captain Hammond's house was supposed to be Randolph's only London home, and it was there that he must be looked for in the first instance. Desmond went straight from Waterloo Station to the house in Daneborough Gardens, where a parlourmaid, with her hair in the latest fashion and a dirty cap, informed him that Captain Hammond was out, but that Mrs. Hammond was at home and perhaps would see him.

He would be very glad if Mrs. Hammond would

be good enough to see him. He asked the maid to tell her that he had come from Lorringford to inquire about Mr. Randolph Hammond.

"We haven't seen nothing of him for this ever so long," the maid volunteered, before carrying the message.

He heard her talking to her mistress in a room at the back of the hall, one of those dreary back rooms which in London "Gardens" are generally chosen for the drawing-room, the place of idle hours and joyous entertainments; windows looking upon the abject misery of London trees and the gloom of smoke-darkened shrubs.

Mrs. Hammond's pleasure-room had at least the merit of unconventionality. There was nothing Philistine about it; not even a satin sofa-pillow or an embroidered chair-back. Captain Hammond's tobacco box and pipes had thrust aside the heterogeneous *bric-à-brac* on the mantelpiece, while a tantalus, syphons, and tumblers, upon a buhl cabinet, and an open card-cable, indicated hospitable intentions.

"I'm expecting him home any minute," said Mrs. Hammond, after she had glanced at Desmond's credentials. "He ain't at home before dinner as a rule, but this is my bridge afternoon, and I like to have him. A parcel of women are pretty sure to quarrel over cards if there ain't a man to keep them in order. I don't say anything about cheating. I dare say you've your own opinions of us ladies in that matter."

The lady concluded with a jovial laugh. She was large and florid. Nobody could have called her the remains of a fine woman. She was rather the amplification of something that had once counted for beauty, a Gilray caricature of the woman she had been.

The florid complexion was chastened by one of those much-advertised washes that under innumer-

able aliases conceal their family name, which is bismuth. The chastening process had cast a violet shade upon Mrs. Hammond's peony cheeks, which her friends and contemporaries were apt to remark, unaware that they themselves were purple.

Hating nothing more than her own society, Mrs. Hammond welcomed even a stranger with graciousness. And in this case the stranger possessed a peculiar charm, since he came from a house she would never be allowed to enter, and about which she thirsted for information.

"So the old lady sent you to look after her grandson?" she said, when Desmond had stated his business. "I was sorry to hear she'd been dangerously ill. Muriel wrote to her pa about it. I suppose she's breaking fast."

"She shows few signs of age; but the illness was serious."

"Poor old thing! Is this Lorringford a pretty place?"

"I have never seen a prettier."

"I didn't care for her place in Hertfordshire. I hate a house in a park, shut in with horrid old trees—gloomy and stuffy," said Mrs. Hammond, whose knowledge of the Hertfordshire place was derived solely from photographs.

She had invited Desmond to the arm-chair by the fire, opposite her American rocking-chair, which favoured him with a view of plump little feet in silk stockings and beaded shoes, feet which had been one of Mrs. Hammond's "points" when she was Jettie Jones and an idol of the Pandemonium music-hall.

"Help yourself to a drink," she said, with a motion of a dimpled hand towards the chiffonier. "Well, I never," on his smiling a refusal, "the young men of the present day are no end of sober. I don't know where we're coming to. Vegetables

and barley water. I suppose that's what we shall all be living upon before long."

Desmond thought the new dietary might improve Mrs. Hammond's complexion, and possibly chasten the too ample charms of her figure.

"As to Randolph's goings-on, you've come to the wrong shop for hearing much about him," she went on. "He hasn't been near us since Boxing Day, when he condescended just to look in at lunch, and wish us a Happy Christmas after it was over. And we'd just spoilt the table on Christmas Day, by keeping a place for him. Like King Duncan's ghost in *Macbeth*, don't you know."

And then after a pause, in which she admired the glitter of the fire-light on her beaded shoes :

"If you knew how I doted upon that boy! Nothing was too good for him. His little Highland suits came from the most expensive place in London. And he used to sit up to dinner with his pa and I, more often than not—and had his little glass of port, like a grown-up. I couldn't have spoilt him more if he'd been my own kid. I never did care for his sister, a little puling thing, always on the fret."

"There's nothing puling about the young lady now," said Desmond. "She's as gay as she is pretty, except in a time of anxiety like that she has just gone through."

"I suppose you and her will be making a match of it. Rannie said she was over head and ears in love with you."

"He was talking nonsense."

"Well, he does sometimes talk out of the top of his head. But Muriel would be a good catch for anybody, as I suppose the old lady will make a great heiress of her and chuck poor Rannie. If she does, it will be partly his own fault, for he ought to have got the length of her foot last year, living in her house for months at a stretch, and I suppose making himself agreeable to her, which is more

than he's ever done for me and his father since he got spun for the Army."

"I cannot speculate upon Mrs. Warden's disposal of her fortune," Desmond said; "but she is so good a woman that I can be sure she will make a just will."

"Then she'll leave Ran half. Less than that wouldn't be fair. Poor old Ran! After all, perhaps he's fonder of us than we think for."

She picked up a gaudy-looking muff that had been lying on a sofa, with her hat and gloves, and exhibited it to Desmond, smoothing it with her podgy hand.

"This was Ran's New Year's present to me. I didn't get it till February, but he meant it for the New Year. It's made of pheasants' breasts —his own shooting and his own curing. Rather nice of him, wasn't it?"

"He cured the skins himself, you say? Is it a troublesome process?"

"I suppose it is, and I don't know that he was quite successful with it. The muff was rather smelly at first. The Captain said he'd rather we'd had the birds to roast. Men have no sentiment. I thought it was quite touching of Ran skinning the birds and curing the skins—such a nasty job—just to gratify his step-ma. It was out of his line, don't you know, to take that kind of trouble."

Desmond thought it would be so much out of Randolph's line that he must needs have some deeper motive than the desire to please a foolish woman.

He urged Mrs. Hammond to tell him anything she knew about her step-son's movements.

"His sister is anxious about him," he said. "I saw his name as a visitor at Monte Carlo in an evening paper last week."

"So did my old man. But we don't know where

he got the oof to take him there, unless his Grannie shelled out extra handsome."

"His grandmother was not in a condition to shell out. She was in peril of death when he left Lorriford. But he may never have gone to Monte Carlo—or he may be back in London. Perhaps you can help me by referring me to some of his young men friends who may be able to tell me what he is doing."

"I don't mind telling you anything I know about his pals, but it ain't much. You see, the plain fact is, Master Ran is an ungrateful cad, and for the last two or three years his father and I have had very little of his company. It's my belief he only comes here when he's stony broke and wants free quarters. What he does with himself outside this house I can't say; but I suspect there's a woman in the case, for a lady friend of mine has seen him at the Empire and the Pav. with a tremendous swell in velvet and Russian sable, and evidently spooning her, though she looked a goodish bit older than him. As to his men friends, the most I can tell you is of three chaps who have come here now and again, two of 'em artists, and one a medical student, a school-fellow, rather a clever young chap, with lots of talk of new discoveries in chemistry, and with his hands and nails stained with chemicals, and a disgrace to a lady's dinner-table. Rank Bohemians, all three of them," concluded Mrs. Hammond, unconscious of anything Bohemian in her own surroundings, in spite of the Captain's red morocco slippers tilted at an angle on the fender, and the Captain's pipes on the mantelpiece, and the fringes of the blinds hanging in ragged festoons, and a recent cartoon from "Vanity Fair" pinned against the wall, between coloured lithographs of world-renowned cricketers and the last Derby winner.

"Perhaps one of these young men might be able to tell me where your step-son is to be found, if

you would be so kind as to give me their addresses."

"Oh, I'll do that with pleasure. They all dig together—not ten minutes' walk from here—I suppose you know the 'Admiral Keppel'?"

Desmond had to confess his ignorance, on which Mrs. Hammond gave him the address of a certain pile of artistic flats, not remote from that old-established tavern, where Luke and Matt Bowden and Patrick O'Neil, were to be found.

"I don't believe the Bowdens ever put thier noses outside the door till it's pitch dark," she said, "so you've a chance of finding them at home, unless you leave it till to-morrow and stay and play bridge with me and three of my lady friends. They'll be here at four o'clock. And you'll be able to keep order if the Captain don't turn up."

Desmond had to refuse this alluring invitation.

"I suppose Mr. O'Neil is at his hospital all day," he added.

"That's where he ought to be. But you don't mean to tell me that you've come to your time of life without playing bridge?"

"I have been too busy a man to add that to my few accomplishments."

"Well, I never! What do they do with themselves at Lorringford?"

"They have not yet taken to bridge."

"Poor things! I knew they must be behind the times, but I didn't think they were quite such antediluvians. Well, ta-ta, and I hope you'll run the young man down, and if you do find him you may tell him he's stopped away so long that he needn't put himself out to look up me and his governor."

Loud ringing and louder knocking, slipshod feet of slatternly maid in the hall, a door opening and a wave of perfume mingling with the normal stuffiness, announced the arrival of two of Mrs. Hammond's

lady friends, fat, fair, and forty, like herself, bland and courteous in acknowledging Desmond's bow, as he hurried to the outer air.

"Who's your friend?" asked one of them, as she opened the drawing-room door. "Not a bad-looking chap."

"A young man from Lorriford with a message from Mrs. Warden."

"Pressing you to go down for a week-end, I suppose?"

"She's left off doing that, as I've always had to refuse. Well, *you* know I can't get away from home."

"You could if Hammond would take you."

"Ah, that's what he won't. He hates the fuss of country house visiting."

"I suppose he does, for I've never known him and *you* go anywhere."

Mrs. Hammond felt sorry that the limitations of social life and the exigencies of bridge had forced her to be friendly with a woman who said "anywheres," and asked impertinent questions; but this particular lady friend played a feeble game and didn't mind losing, and so was useful.

Desmond walked with slower steps than his wont towards the Brompton Road, thinking deeply. That trivial episode of the pheasant-feather muff was the subject of his thoughts. He remembered to have heard—or read—that arsenic was much used in the curing of skins, and in the preparation of stuffed animals. And on such a pretext, it might have been feasible for Randolph to obtain as much as he wanted of that perilous drug, without exciting suspicion.

Was it probable, on the other hand, that with a mind distracted by his unhappy passion for Belle Farrowgate, he would occupy himself in making a feather muff for his step-mother, a woman of whom he spoke with open disgust? Muriel had told

Desmond the hard things he had said of his father's wife, pitying him for the hateful association. And could the man who had watched and studied him believe that he would trouble himself with the preparation of a piece of finery at a time when he must have been full of care?

In the pheasant-feather muff Desmond saw the machinery by which Muriel's brother had obtained the material for murder.

## CHAPTER XXV.

ROMNEY MANSION is a tall block of red brick and stone dressings—vulgarly known as the streaky bacon style of building—not far from the world-renowned “Admiral” and the teeming metropolitan life which has congregated in a district that was once almost rural. The slum has invaded the suburb, and streets that were once shabby-genteel are now filthy or squalid. Out of this slum life, like a tall gaudy flower out of a hot-bed, arose the modern Tower of Babel that called itself Romney Mansion. The confusion of tongues was heard at the base of the tower in the raucous cries of costermongers bawling their wares in language that might be anything from Assyrian to Zulu, but which was understood of the people from early acquired knowledge of the various merchandise rather than by any meaning in the sounds.

The board in the early Georgian vestibule recorded Mr. Luke Bowden and Mr. Matthew Bowden as “in,” whereupon Desmond began the ascent of the stone staircase, and toiled manfully to the fifth floor. The lift was out of order.

The door was opened promptly by a young man with a mahl-stick in his hand. There were two easels in the large bare room, and a dirty little girl from the teeming world below was sitting meekly on a rush-bottomed chair, mounted on an inverted egg-box and placed mid-way between the easels. Her hair, which was lovely, hung loose upon her

contracted shoulders, and her frosty hands held a basket of withered primroses.

“Mr. Bowden, I believe,” said Desmond.

“You behold that world-renowned artist, conspicuous by never having had a picture hung at Burlington House. Come in! Who’s afraid? You look too much of a gentleman to have come after the rent.”

Desmond hastened to announce his name, and to explain his mission. He had come to inquire about Randolph Hammond, whose people in the country were anxious about him.

“Is it the jolly old grandam? I thought she was booked for a better world. Ran told us there was very little chance of her recovery.”

“Then you have seen him since she was taken ill?”

“Yes; he ran in here one morning. He wanted to see O’Neil.”

“Your medical friend?”

“Precisely. Our Bob Sawyer. Times may change, but men don’t. Pat O’Neil has a touch of Lant Street about him in his hours of ease—though he’s miles above the early Victorian student in learning. He’s going to be a shining light. Let me present my brother—Matthew Bowden, unrecognized genius number two.”

The other painter had gone on with his work, unmoved by the intrusion of a stranger. He nodded to Desmond, without looking away from his model.

“That’s the fourth time you’ve yawned in five minutes,” he said severely. “Just when I’m painting your mouth, too! The light’s nearly done. I suppose we’d better let her go, Luke. Here’s your shilling, missy; and if you can cheat the school board to-morrow afternoon, you can come straight from morning school here, and we’ll give you your dinner.”

"A mutton chop?" the child asked, with glistening eyes. "Or a bit of rump steak, cooked over there?" pointing to the comfortable fire.

"Chop or steak it shall be. What did you have for dinner to-day?"

"Bread and dripping."

"And what'll you get for supper to-night?"

"Bread and treacle."

"And for dinner yesterday?"

A tear stole slowly down the pallid cheek.

"Nothing, I suppose?"

The girl nodded yes.

"And who is to get that bob?"

"Muvver. Daddy don't know I comes here."

Desmond caught her as she shuffled to the door, and slipped a half-crown into her hand, whereat, without a word of thanks, she rushed out and tore down the stairs.

"They don't teach manners at the board school," said Matthew Bowden, still painting. "But she's a good little kiddie. She'll carry your tip straight to her mother. And the mother works like blazes—and the father works when the humour takes him, and drinks hard the rest of the week."

"Come, Mat. put down your brushes and get us our tea," said Luke, on which Matthew, softly whistling to himself the while, went to a cupboard, set out a tea-tray and made hospitable preparation for the afternoon meal with the dexterity of a steward on a yacht.

"Draw your chair to the fire, Mr. Desmond," said Luke. "So old Mrs. Warden has weathered the storm? Ran ought to be uncommonly glad to hear it, when he comes back, for she's been a kind friend to him, though he missed his tip by not being adopted by her. She must have done him rather handsomely when he left her the other day."

"You can't show yourself at Monte Carlo without a quid or two—unless you go as an itinerant painter,

as I mean to do one of these odd days, stay in cheap diggings, live on sardines and macaroni, and spend all my days on the hills painting old women with olive baskets on their backs, or children sprawling in a bed of anemones—you know ! The impressionist caper, slices of cobalt for your sky, and chunks of sap green for your trees, and all the rest yellow ochre and Indian red,” said Matthew cheerily, as he nipped the tin kettle off the coals and made the tea.

“ He had got the oof, and no mistake,” said Luke, “ for he gave O’Neil ten quid, which was handsomely to behave.”

“ It was a new departure,” said Matthew, “ for generosity is not the last infirmity of that youth’s noble mind.”

“ Oh, we all know where his money went. When a man is over head and ears in love with a lady who knows how to take care of herself—which they all do, bless ’em,” said Luke, handing cups and saucers and bread and butter and cake, which Matthew had prepared with a nicety hardly to be expected from the aspect of the carpetless and curtainless studio.

Desmond thought how much pleasanter Bohemianism was here than in Mrs. Hammond’s drawing-room, where the sultry atmosphere tasted of dust and smelt of whisky.

“ I suppose you know of Hammond’s infatuation, since you are a friend of the family ? ” Matthew said.

“ His people know nothing about it, but I came to know of it by a fluke.”

“ He’s never been good for much since that lady took him in tow. He came here in a tremendous state of excitement one afternoon, about a week after he came from Lorringford. He’d been to her diggings—in one of the streets off the Brompton Road—and found she had gone to Monte Carlo the day before, without having given him a hint of her

intention ; so he made up his mind to start in the Continental train that night, and we've heard nothing of him since then."

" Was it then he gave your friend the money ? "

" Yes, it was then. He'd been thicker with Pat than with either of us ; for, you see, he knows no more of art than a Persian cat, and he had a sort of fancy for chemistry, and was always wanting to know about minerals and drugs, and that sort of stuff. At least, that was the fancy he took up lately—inspired by O'Neil."

" Pat helped him with his last fad," said Luke.

" You mean his pheasant-curing ? " said Desmond.

" How did you know of that ? " asked Matthew.

" I've just come from his step-mother, who showed me the muff he made for her."

" A curious fancy, wasn't it, for a young loafer like that, who didn't know the meaning of work ? He made Patrick's den in a nice mess with his pheasants—and the birds were so mauled before he got the feathers off 'em that they were good for nothing, but to give to the porter."

" Was he long about the work ? "

" A goodish bit. He began it late in October, and he used to run in for an hour at odd times when he was in London, and work at the stuff. And with it all he produced two muffs, and a hat for the model you saw just now, which has got her into trouble at the Sunday school where she insisted upon wearing it after the teacher had forbidden her."

The sound of a latch-key, and the latest hit of the music-halls in a strenuous tenor, announced the medical student's home-coming.

He accepted Desmond's presence by the artistic hearth with Hibernian cordiality, asked for a fresh pot of tea, produced a piece of Italian sausage from one outside pocket, and a Vienna loaf from another, and proceeded to make himself agreeable while he

buttered his bread and sliced his sausage, diffusing an insidious aroma of garlic as he did so.

"And you'll be after inquiring about young Hammond," he said. "It's divil a bit we know of him since he rampaged off to the South—after a lady who shall be nameless—because the name I should like to call her ain't good manners."

"Do you all know the lady?" Desmond asked.

"Oh, we've all seen her about with him—in one place or another, at the boat race last year, at the Derby the year before, at Kettner's, at the 'Continental,' at the Tiv. But there's very little in it on her side. She just lets him run after her, and pay for dinners, and suppers, and theatres, and hansom. She could find employment for half a dozen fools of his calibre; but he'll have to be sure of his grandam's money before she'll take him on seriously."

Desmond made no reply, and the talk drifted to other topics. O'Neil told his friends of an interesting operation which had diversified the monotony of ordinary cases, and it was not till he had finished his too graphic description of the surgeon's work and drained the teapot that Desmond rose to go.

"I should be much obliged if you would give me a few minutes in your own room," he said to O'Neil, after he had taken a friendly leave of the two Bowdens. "I want to ask you a question about your friend Hammond."

O'Neil led the way across the landing to his own quarters, which consisted of a large room corresponding to the Bowden studio, and a small bedroom in the rear, commanding the uninterrupted view of a dead wall.

"Is it about his affair with the lady you'd be after asking?" the young man inquired in his cheery Irish voice, as he motioned his visitor to a seat which would have been an easy chair if the

springs had not been broken and most of the stuffing gone.

Patrick's visitors were not inconvenienced by this state of things, as they seldom sat on the seat of a chair. They preferred a side-saddle position on the arm.

"No, I am not concerned about the lady. Women of that kind are much of the same pattern."

"As like as eggs are eggs—the French kind, three-and-twenty for a shilling, most of 'em rotten."

"I am only interested in Randolph Hammond. I want to know how much arsenic you got for him."

Patrick's honest face turned to the speaker with a startled look.

"What the devil do you want to know that for?" he asked fiercely.

"I have the gravest reasons for my inquiry."

"Gravest fiddlesticks! Has his step-mother's muff gone wrong? I never thought he'd make much of a job of his feather work. But it was a fad of the moment, and he was quite keen on it. How did you know he'd been using arsenic?"

"I guessed as much when I saw the muff, and I had reason to know that he had arsenic in his possession before then."

"Arsenic in his possession! What do you mean by that? He had no arsenic out of this room where he cured his pheasant skins. I didn't get arsenic for him. I let him use some that I had for preparing specimens—adders, and other things, that I brought home with me from a walking tour in the New Forest. The stuff is in a bottle over there," he added, pointing to a dumb-waiter crowded with bottles and boxes.

"Have you any means of knowing how much arsenic he took out of that bottle, or how much he carried away with him?"

"How the devil could I know? I let him take what he wanted out of the bottle. I warned him that he mustn't leave any about. The poison label is big enough for a board-school infant to keep his paws off the bottle."

"Did you take the trouble to see how your friend used the stuff?"

"Not much! I let him mess about here while I was at the hospital; and a jolly mess he made of my room with his skins and feathers. He's the last amateur taxidermist that I'll ever have on the premises. The flat smelt of dead birds for weeks after he'd done."

Desmond had been scrutinizing the room while they talked. There was a large deal table in front of the one wide window, a business-like table, covered with bottles, jars, a marble mortar, a small still, and other articles needful to the practical chemist. Among the bottles, several of them of dark blue corrugated glass, and many of them labelled poison, he could distinguish a sixteen-ounce bottle labelled *liquor arsenicalis*, and also a blue glass jar containing a crystalline powder that he knew to be arsenic.

"I see you have it in both forms," he said. "Do you know if Hammond used the liquid or the powder?"

"The powder, I take it, though I've never done his kind of work."

"Did you miss any of the liquid arsenic when he had done?"

"I haven't even looked at the bottle. Man alive, what do you mean by asking such questions about a pal of mine? What have you got at the back of your head?"

He went to the table and snatched up the bottle of liquid arsenic.

"This was about three parts full when I used it last, before Christmas, and it's three parts full

now. What do you mean by such upsetting talk?"

He took out the cork and tasted the liquid on the tip of his tongue.

"My God!" he cried; "this is water!"

"Then I know where that young man got the poison that brought a good woman to the brink of death. She was only saved by her own instinct, which warned her that she was being slowly murdered."

Patrick O'Neil was horror-stricken. Perhaps his happy-go-lucky temperament had never received such a shock. He was slow to be convinced that the poison to which he had given his friend easy access had been used for such a deadly purpose; but after Desmond had told him the particulars of Mrs. Warden's illness, and the opinion of Sir Julius Martley, there was no room left for doubt.

"And I made that man my friend, and trusted him as if he had been my brother. What a villain! Why the devils in hell are not worse than that! A poisoner—a secret murderer! Slow and stealthy—smiling in the face of his victim—the man whose hand I have grasped. Thank God I haven't touched a ten-pound note he gave me the other day. He was flush of money, he told me, and he made me a present for the trouble he'd given me about his fad of feather-dressing, just to pay for the cleaning up of my den, he said. And the fad was a blind, a trick to get the stuff he wanted without arousing suspicion. He knew I wouldn't have given it to him without a good reason."

"It was deep," said Desmond; and then, remembering those lapses of troubled thought which he had observed in Randolph, he added: "I believe he was a long time making his plans—a long time sitting in his grandmother's company and considering how he was to kill her. He thought it all out thoroughly, you may be sure, before he carried out his scheme with you."

“ And I was blinder than the blindest mole. If a man I knew in a casual way had come to me, wanting arsenic to kill rats, I should have been quick enough to suspect suicide or murder, and devil a grain he’d have got out of me. But Randolph ! A man I’d known for years. We were at the same preparatory school, and played together as kids. How could I suspect him ? ”

“ The poisoner is generally a surprise to his friends. No doubt there were people who liked Mr. Pritchard, of Glasgow ; and I have heard that all the Doncaster bookies were friends with William Palmer.”

“ What are you going to do now ? ”

“ I am going to see Sir Julius Martley, and to hear what he will do.”

“ Sure that’ll be nothing. He won’t stir on a suspicion ; and your circumstantial evidence would hardly be strong enough to convince a jury in a case of attempted murder. They’d want a lot more. Thank God the good lady is alive. No, I don’t believe Sir Julius will move in the matter.”

Patrick O’Neil had not erred in his forecast of Sir Julius Martley’s line of conduct, for on Desmond telling him the story of the feather muff and the bottle of *liquor arsenicalis*, he said gravely :

“ This evidence would hardly suffice for a prosecution ; but it will fully justify me in telling Mrs. Warden that her grandson was in fixed intent a murderer, and that he only stopped short when he saw his own danger. That will protect her from any further attempt, and will no doubt influence her in the disposal of her fortune.”

“ But how about other people ? Is not such a man a standing danger to the community ? ”

“ My dear fellow, there are plenty of such standing dangers walking about London, as your Irish friend might say. But I don’t believe this young man will

go farther. He had a powerful motive for getting rid of Mrs. Warden. Her death meant half a million. He may never again have a strong reason for wanting to get rid of anyone. He is too transparent for a great criminal."

"He always seemed to me so peculiarly secret."

"That's where he is transparent. Your clever purposeful villain has always an open manner. It's one of the arts he cultivates. This young man will never be a great criminal. The professional murderer with a future before him would never have shown the white feather as this young man did. He would never have left that house under a cloud. He would have stayed and played the game of bluff. When Mrs. Warden is strong enough to bear a shock I will run down to Lorringford and tell her what I think about her grandson, what I almost know about him."

Desmond left Harley Street unconvinced as to the wisdom of Sir Julius Martley's course, but determined at any cost to protect Mrs. Warden from further danger. He had confidence in her good sense and in her courage, and he believed that when her grandson's true character was revealed she would know how to defend herself.

He went to Bournemouth on the day after his interview with Sir Julius, and was rejoiced at the improvement which the change of air and surroundings had made in the convalescent. The sea breezes blew cheerfulness into her nostrils, the sunlit expanse between her windows and the white cliffs of the island was a joy.

"Muriel and I do not travel enough," she said. "We must go about more and see more things. We have been no better than limpets since we pitched our tent at Lorringford."

Muriel had been restless and unhappy about her brother.

"It is absurd for Muriel to worry herself about

that young man," she said. "He is only shirking Rhodesia. I thought he promised too much when he came back to us after the New Year. I begin to think he never meant to go to Africa."

"It's rather unkind of you to say that, Grannie, when you must know the poor fellow had made up his mind to exile himself in order to please you."

"And now he has exiled himself at Monte Carlo. He will have to alter his ways, or I shall have to alter my will," Mrs. Warden answered severely.

"Oh, Grannie, don't talk of your will," cried Muriel, almost in tears. "You mustn't think of making one for ages and ages."

Desmond stayed one night at the pleasant Bath Hotel, and went back to London in the morning.

His book had been published on the previous day, and he was eager to carry a copy to Vera. He smiled as he thought of his resemblance to Nick the terrier, running with a bit of stick in his mouth to drop it as tribute at her feet. He fancied himself like Nick in his dog-like affection, willing that she should set her foot upon his neck.

He found his publisher in high spirits.

"I believe 'An Angel' is going to catch on," he said.

"What symptoms of catching on can you see so early?"

The publisher handed him three daily papers.

"The reviews are magnificent. You mustn't mind the slating in the *Rampart*. It will do you more good than harm," he said.

"But there has been no time for the reviewers to read the book."

"I sent them their copies a week ago."

"And you didn't send me one."

"I'll send you six to-morrow."

"Give me one to-day."

The publisher smiled at his eagerness.

Desmond carried his book to Foxcopsis, as straight as the Windsor express and his own long legs could take him. But he could not refrain from peeping into the pages while he was in the train, and he thought it looked interesting ; better, at any rate, than it had looked in the printers' galleys.

Vera was in a labyrinth of flowers, daffodils, narcissi, hyacinths purple and white, tulips yellow and red, just bursting into bloom, tufts of primroses and polyanthus. She seemed to him the living spirit of spring. She blushed with glad surprise at his approach, and was quick to notice the parcel he carried.

" You have brought me your novel," she cried eagerly.

" The first copy," he said, as he took off the crisp white paper, and handed her the book.

The binding was attractive, a delicate French grey, diapered with *fleur-de-lys*, and on the upper right-hand panel the figure of an angel holding a cup.

" Oh, how lovely. But the book was advertised to appear yesterday, and I have been horribly impatient. My father ordered a copy from the Windsor bookseller a fortnight ago, and we ought to have had it last night. I suppose there has been such a rush for it that they can't print it fast enough."

" I don't think they have begun the second edition yet," said Desmond, drinking her words as if they were nectar for parched lips. " But I found the publisher in a good humour. And he gave me some reviews to read in the train, two amazingly kind, and the third a torrent of abuse. He seemed to think the torrent would do the book most good."

Vera made the usual request. She must have her name in the book, hers and the writer's. His name was not on the title-page, where he was described only as " The Author of ' Life and Time. ' "

"That is quite enough," Vera said. "Everybody must have read your essays, and everybody will be dying to read your novel. Will you come to the library, and let my father see your book? I think you must know that he likes you very much."

"How much would he like me if he knew that I came to his house in the darkness, an escaped gaol-bird—on that never-to-be-forgotten night when I met my Angel of Mercy?"

She gave a little cry of glad surprise as she looked at the title on the cover and the angel outlined in thin gold.

"Were you really thinking of me when you chose the name of your book?"

"I never think of anyone else. You are my angel of mercy. Your spirit was with me as I wrote. You lived and moved through the mazes of my dream. There could have been no book without you. The soul of my story comes from you."

He saw her eyes cloud with tears as she turned from him, leading the way to the house. She stopped before they crossed the lawn in front of the library windows, and said gravely:

"You do not know what a noble mind my father has. If he knew your sad history he would be shocked even while he was sorry for you; but if he believed you had suffered unjustly, those dark years at Prince Town would count for nothing against his esteem for you."

"If he believed! But do you think he ever could believe?"

"Why should he not, if I do?"

"You are a woman—young and unversed in the world's ways. Your heart has never been schooled by our remorseless social law. You are my angel of mercy. It is natural for you to pity and believe."

"There is no more benevolent man living than my father. In all my life I never heard him speak ill of anybody."

"Will you do something for me—something troublesome, perhaps?"

"I will do anything that is not wrong, and I know you would not ask me to do wrong, even that good might come of it."

"On the contrary, I want you to do what is right, though bad may come of it—right for yourself and right for me. I have come into this house under a false aspect—as a man who has never suffered disgrace. I own no obligation to the world in general, since I want nothing from the world, except change for my shilling. But here I must be known as the man I am: an escaped convict, subject to be taken back to prison if George Desmond ever came to be identified with the man in the dock. I want your father to know the worst of me, just as you do, and it will be for him to decide whether I am ever to cross his threshold again. I want you to lay the story of my wretched life before him, and to be my advocate."

Vera looked distressed, and yet she was proud of him, remembering how he had kept his secret from Mrs. Warden, where he had so much less to hazard.

Here she knew as well as he did that he was staking his life's happiness.

"Would it not be better to wait till my father knows you better?" she said slowly. "He likes you so much already. You have taken such an interest in his hobby. You are cleverer than other young men whom he has tried to interest in the things he loves. He will attach himself more to you as time goes on, if you are often with him."

"And when the day comes that he must be told, what will he think of me for accepting his friendship when I knew that, from the worldly point of view, I was unworthy to be called his friend? Generous-minded as he is, he would never have anything more to do with me. I have gone too far already; but I must make my stand now."

And then he told her that in those long days at

the British Museum, he had taken time from his literary work, and had made a careful copy of the verbatim report of the trial in which he had been involved, an innocent accomplice in a daring crime. There was enough, he thought, in the evidence to convince any unbiassed mind that he had been a tool and not a conscious assistant in the complicated scheme of fraud. He was prepared to submit to Sir Emanuel's decision after he had read the report.

"Even if he should agree with the jury and find me guilty, I dare hope that although I might never again enter this house as your father's friend you would not utterly forsake me."

"No," she answered quickly. "I shall always be your friend."

"That is enough for me. And now good-bye. I will send you the report to-morrow. It is very long, and your father must read it at his leisure."

"You must not go till we have shown him your book."

"Would it not be better——?"

"No, no. I want to have one happy hour."

"Before the coming of doom."

They went indoors together, and found Sir Emanuel in his library. Even now no word of love had been spoken, and yet it was as if they had been long betrothed. When lovers are young and the divine passion is free from all baser elements love has no need of words. There is a mute understanding that two lives have become one, that all hopes, interests, dreams of the future, ambitions and desires, are mutual, and could not exist apart. The single self-absorbed life has become the double life. His thought is always of how things will affect her; and her thought is of him. She can scarcely gather a flower in her garden without wondering if its beauty will last till his coming. It is worthless if he cannot taste its charm. And this unspoken bond united the fugitive from Prince

Town and the girl who had saved him. Almost from her first coming to Lorringford Desmond had known that she loved him and would be his wife in spite of the world. No affianced lovers—were their betrothal advertised in the second column of the *Times*—were ever more sure of each other than Vera and Desmond.

Everything was cosy and home-like in the library at Foxcopse, in spite of the relics of primeval man that adorned walls and occupied shelves where only books ought to have been. The room had been furnished by Sir Emanuel's predecessor, and the rich colouring of the Turkey carpet and dark blue velvet curtains, the capacious comfort of morocco-covered arm-chairs, the quaint forms of high-backed chairs that reproduced the ornate age of Anne, and the old Hanoverian silver candelabra, realized Desmond's idea of comfort and splendour in a room where a venerable student might be pleased to spend the greater part of his declining years. Certainly Sir Emanuel seemed among the happiest of mankind, as he laid aside his book, and rose to greet his daughter and her friend.

“My day's work is over,” he said cheerily.

Tea was being brought in, and Vera took her place at the table, where teapot and cups and saucers were at least a century old, while the urn, with its lion's-head handles, was old enough to have hissed and bubbled for Pope's Belinda.

Desmond thought of that dainty lady as Vera's pretty hands moved lightly between the urn and teapot.

“Is this your novel?” Sir Emanuel asked eagerly, as he took up the book that his daughter had just laid down.

He turned the pages slowly.

“Danton, Camille Desmoulins, Marat! A story of the French Revolution! I wonder you chose

so modern a period. I thought all the grain had been thrashed out, and that nothing but chaff was left."

"I have tried to make the best of the chaff. The period has always had an irresistible fascination for me."

"I wonder," said Sir Emanuel musingly, "I wonder that you can find anything romantic in that ghastly epoch. It is so near us."

"So near, and yet so far off," said Desmond. "It is an epoch that seems to me to have no date—not to belong to the common course of time. The wheels of the clocks, the shadows on the sundials, stood still. The very nomenclature of time was altered. It was a dream of fire and blood. It was the red right hand of Jove, offended at the hideous injustice of man, hurling thunderbolts that crushed the innocent along with the guilty."

Sir Emanuel heard him with the musing face of one who does not listen; and it may be observed that no man with a hobby ever listens. He talks of his hobby, and when he is not talking of it he thinks about it. Sir Emanuel, being "hard of hearing," as his servants said, had long given up the attempt to hear.

"I wonder you have not thought of primitive man as a subject for a novel," he said in his grave, friendly voice. "Think how vast the scope, how magnificent the background, how stupendous the interest. In this decadent age, when every story of modern life has been told, and every problem of modern society—which appears to be made up of problematical people and circumstances—has been solved, think what an eagle flight it would be for the young romancer to soar into the measureless realm of the remote past, to think himself into the cloud-curtained beginning of conscious life, to think himself into the minds of the first men who thought. Figure to yourself that mysterious hour

in this earth's history when the man-like ape merged into the ape-like man, when the narrow brains of the first wild brood of men began to think with human thought, when that ineffable something beyond the intelligence of brutes broke like a light upon the world. What a wealth of material ! Oh, believe me, my dear Desmond, in the valley of the Somme, or the delta of the Mississippi, in the mysterious caves of Patagonia, or the rock-dens of Shetland, there is material enough for a generation of novelists."

Desmond agreed that by the pen of a master even those remote ages might be made to live again, but he did not think that it came within his means to clothe fossil man with a mind and a history.

" You forget that he was a man before he was a fossil, and that love and hate were the same passions when the cave lioness fought for her young and the cave lion ranged where the Solent sea now flows over a forgotten world."

Sir Emanuel sipped his tea with enjoyment, after expatiating upon his beloved theme ; and Desmond, though he had not caught enough inspiration for even a short story about primeval man, was charmed to listen to Vera's father. He had, in the schoolboy slang, " mugged up " Sir Emanuel's subject since the dinner-party at Foxcose, and he was prepared to discuss any point in the history of men who bridged the gap between the savage and the ape. But he might have saved himself the labour, as Sir Emanuel wanted listeners, not disputants, and he did not give Desmond a chance of parading any of his newly-acquired learning.

It was a happy tea-party, in the spacious room, and the spring brightness of flowers did not seem out of harmony with the red glow of beech logs on the open hearth, where mediæval iron standards that had once held the strong drink of a stouter

race now served to hold a muffin dish and a hot-water jug.

“ If ever you make up your mind to write such a romance as I have suggested, I should be glad to help you with the details, the scenery, the atmosphere. I have not the novelist’s imagination, but I could be useful to the novelist,” Sir Emanuel concluded, with a glow of pride.

Desmond declared that if it were ever borne in upon him to write such a book he would most gratefully avail himself of that vast store of knowledge that Sir Emanuel placed at his disposal.

“ In the meantime, I shall be very proud if you will dip into my poor story of a human convulsion, not a geological one.”

“ I shall read every line,” Sir Emanuel said solemnly.

Would they ever be sitting together so happily again, Desmond wondered ; or was this exquisite tea the last these three would ever drink in amity ? He was going to burn his ships, and he must wait for the result. Would Destiny be kind ? Or would he be forbidden the house as a friend, and sternly rejected as a lover ? He could but wait and hope. He knew that Vera loved him, and he believed that come what might, she would be his wife.

He carried her image with him when he went back to the lock-house, walking from Penlow Station by meadow and river, with his face to the calm saffron sky. He meant to post the history of his father’s crime to Vera next morning. His two books would show Sir Emanuel what he felt and thought. The report of the trial would reveal the worst that had happened to him ; the dark episode in his life which might banish him from Foxcose.

Mrs. Hawker attended Desmond at his solitary dinner, in her dual character of cook and butler, proud of the dishes that she had prepared, and of

her skill in serving them. She always appeared with unimpeachable hands, and spotless cap and apron, and the only evidence of her toil before the kitchen range was to be seen in her heightened complexion. No quick-change artist of the music-halls could have made a more rapid transformation than Mrs. Hawker in the five minutes during which she left her saucepans and frying-pan to the custody of "the girl."

This evening she was elated at a new page in the story of neighbouring lives. She had "partaken" of tea with Mrs. Skeddles, and the invalid had been sitting up for the first time, and had "partaken of" a toasted teacake with a most encouraging appetite.

"The doctor came while we were sitting with him, and when he told him he had turned the corner, the poor young man laughed till he almost cried," related Mrs. Hawker. "You see, he remembered that it was turning the corner by the mill that upset his cart. 'I don't want to turn any more corners, doctor,' he says; 'I'm going straight for the rest of my life, and I'm not going to play at being a fine gentleman any more. It don't answer with a head like mine. I'm going to be my own foreman, as soon as ever I'm strong enough.' And then Mrs. Skeddles, with tears in her eyes, whispered me that Tom had taken the pledge, and that he meant to keep it. As if she could know that, poor woman! However, it's a step in the right direction."

"Yes, it's a hopeful step, at any rate," Desmond agreed.

He was glad to hear that this frail vessel had not been driven into the unknown sea. It was pleasing to find that Mrs. Lavington's visits had not been wasted labour, and that Skeddles had not been quite as "discouraging" as the majority of the Vicar's flock. That was his wife's complaint of them in a general way. They were so "discouraging."

## CHAPTER XXVI.

DESMOND despatched a registered packet to Vera next morning, containing the report that was to be laid before her father. And now came the slow hours of suspense, in which the fevered brain fore-shadows a coming crisis with maddening insistence, hours in which the mind refuses to fix itself on any other subject, and alternates wildly between hope and despair.

How long would he have to wait for his sentence ? Would Vera dash at the first opportunity and lay that terrible record before her father within an hour or two of its arrival ; or would she play a waiting game, watch her opportunity, coax the gentle old man into his most indulgent mood, perhaps win from him some expression of regard for Desmond, and then tell him that sad and shameful story of a young life blighted by the sin of older men, a son ruined by his father's wrong-doing ?

Would she stay by his side while he read the trial, putting in a word of pity now and then, a womanly plea for the man she had saved—her convict ? Or would she just lay the paper on his table with a frightened word or two, and then escape from the room, leaving the mine to explode when she was gone ?

No, he did not think she would show the white feather even in that unhappy moment. He pictured her standing by her father's chair, reading that

horrible history over his shoulder, ready to fight for her convict, ready to argue against his condemnation. He could see her finger pointing to the words the judge had spoken, words that should have resulted in his acquittal. Those were hard men who, in despite of such words, could find no mercy for a youth of two-and-twenty.

He was glad of his task-work at Lorriford that morning, letters to answer, cheques to write and send to Bournemouth for signature, weekly wages to pay, a report to write for Mrs. Warden, telling her every detail of garden and farm and stable, those details the ignorance whereof will sometimes spoil a householder's holiday. He did his work conscientiously, his mind somewhat lightened by the labour ; but in every pause, between the sealing of a letter and the writing of the next, his thoughts went back to Foxcopse and the library where his case might be in course of judgment.

After all, it was only as a friend and guest that Sir Emanuel would consider him, not as a husband for his daughter ; so there was hope that the sentence might be merciful. And later, when his character had been tested in a lengthened intimacy, he might be so fortunate as to wind himself into that kind heart, until there should seem no bar against him as a suitor.

He went straight to the river after his morning's work at Lorriford, and rowed a long way upstream, going ever so far from the spot where all his hopes were centred, and then drifted slowly homeward with the current, brooding, brooding, brooding, visualizing over and over again that imaginary scene between father and daughter—the father severe, the girl pleading, the father relenting ever so little, the girl arguing and insisting, until she forced him to acknowledge that a jury might have erred.

He calculated the chances, and told himself that he might have a letter from Vera by to-morrow

morning's post, a letter to tell him the worst or the best that an honourable line of conduct had done for him.

"The thing had to be done," he thought. "I should have been an abject cad if I could have sat by the good man's hearth and left him in the dark about my history."

It was five o'clock when he went back to the lock-house, and he calculated that he had at least fifteen hours to wait before that expected letter from Vera could possibly arrive. And how could he leave off thinking of her and her father, thinking and conjecturing, now in hope, now in fear? No book, no task, could distract his mind from that subject.

A distraction was waiting for him of no common order. A telegram was lying on his writing-table.

Was his fate decided so soon? And had she telegraphed the result?

He tore off the envelope in wild impatience.

"Come at once. Something dreadful has happened."

His mind was under such obsession that at the first reading he looked neither at the signature nor the heading. He thought the message was from Vera.

Something dreadful! It meant that Sir Emanuel was inexorable. He was never again to be received in friendship.

"Well, what then? She will be true to me," he thought, clenching the flimsy paper in an ice-cold hand.

Then suddenly common-sense returned, and he opened the crumpled message and looked at it calmly. "Handed in at Brompton Road, at 3.50. Signed, O'NEIL."

It was from the medical student. Something dreadful had happened. There was only one person known to Patrick O'Neil in whom he, Desmond,

was interested. The something dreadful must have happened to Randolph Hammond.

Yes, of course, he must go at once. He snatched up a railway card, and looked for the London train. The table was laid for tea, and a cheery log fire was burning. The room had the alluring aspect that our rooms have when we are suddenly called away from them. He had time to walk to Penlow before the next London train, time even for tea. It would be nearly eight o'clock before he could get to Romney Mansion, and it would not be easy to return to the lock-house that night.

He rang for Mrs. Hawker and gave her his instructions. She was not to sit up for him. He had a latchkey. He put on London clothes while she was making his tea, put a few things into a travelling bag, and then sat down to a hurried meal. He did not speculate about the "something dreadful." His brain was worn out with conjecture and visualization upon his own case. He could only answer the summons by his presence.

He wired to O'Neil from Penlow Station, just the one word, "Coming." He was so brain-weary that he fell asleep before the train passed Windsor, and then, awaking at Staines, hated himself for not having been on the alert while he was being carried through the region in which Vera lived ; and then he fell asleep again and slept for the rest of the journey.

The lift was still out of order at Romney Mansion, and he toiled wearily up the five storeys of steep stone stairs to Patrick O'Neil's flat. There was no answer to his ring, and after he had rung a third time the door in the opposite flat was opened by Luke Bowden.

"Oh, it's you, Desmond ! Come in ! Pat got your wire. He's sitting here, you see. Can't stand his own place."

"What has happened ? "

"Something horrible. You came here the other day to ask questions about Randolph Hammond. Well ! There ain't many more questions to be answered about him. O'Neil will tell you. But you must be easy with him, poor chap. He's had a bad shock. Come in."

Desmond followed Luke into the studio where the two pictures of the little flower girl, pinched and wan, but pretty and graceful with the untaught grace of childhood, looked at him from the two easels, alike in subject and utterly different in art, one after Mulready, the other after Degas.

Matthew Bowden was lying back in a ragged armchair, puffing slowly at his short briarwood. Patrick O'Neil was lying on the rickety horsehair sofa, pallid and miserable. He sprang up on hearing Desmond's name.

"I'm glad you've come," he said.

"What's the matter ?"

"Randolph."

"Where is he ?"

"In my room over there."

The horror in his face as he looked towards the opposite door told the story.

"Dead ?"

"Yes. Good God ! why should he come to my place to die ? The world is wide enough. It was a cruel trick to play upon an old friend. And we were schoolboys together, little happy-go-lucky lads at a preparatory school, where we thought we played cricket and footer. And now he is lying there, poor devil."

The young man was walking about the studio, with his hands in his hair, rubbing his head in a distracted way.

"Sit down and have a drink," said Matthew. "He'll tell you the ghastly details. But you must give him time."

"When did it happen ?"

"At three o'clock this afternoon," answered Matthew.

"Was it suicide?"

"Yes. He killed himself. That's the horror of it all!" cried O'Neil excitedly, stopping suddenly in his tramping round the room. "You don't suppose I'm afraid of death. I know him too well—the Rider on the Pale Horse. I have to meet him at the hospital at all hours of the day and night, and I know him in his best and worst aspect—when he comes in a quiet sleep, a release from mortal pain, or when he comes in agony and convulsion. That is God's work, and I take it as God meant us to take it—not the end of life, but a new beginning. But when a man destroys himself—rushes into the black gulf—a man whose after-life may be hell. That's a stammerer."

"Why did he do it?"

"Why? Don't ask why. Ask the name of the woman," said Matthew, knocking out the ashes of his pipe. "I wish I had her head upon this hearth-stone and a navvy's hammer. Mrs. Farrowgate was the reason. She's Mrs. Thomas Blastwick now, a respectable married woman, with a millionaire husband, *en route* for a Continental honeymoon."

"Her house is the way to hell, going down to the chambers of death," quoted Luke, who was standing by his paint-table cleaning his palette.

Then gradually, first by one speaker and then by another, the story of the prodigal's tragedy was unfolded.

Randolph had burst in upon them soon after one o'clock that day in a state of frantic excitement. He had come from Monte Carlo only the day before, with hardly money enough to pay for a glass of brandy on the boat, where he was half dead with seasickness.

"And the poor wretch told us his adventures after he left us in such grand fettle, with a pocket-

ful of money. God knows how he came by the money, but it seems to have been a lot ; and he thought the woman would marry him, and that they could live upon it till he got more. But she fought shy of marriage. He found her in pretty low water at Monte Carlo, and she was glad enough to let him pay her losses at the tables and her expenses at the smartest hotel on the Riviera. I believe that was the extent of her kindness ; and when he had jubilee-plungered his last hundred-franc piece, the lady did what they all do—left him in the lurch.”

“‘ For she has cast down many wounded ; yea, many strong men have been slain by her,’ ” said Luke, like a tragic chorus.

“ And when he found she had given him the slip, the poor devil rushed back to London, penniless and half mad,” said O’Neil, taking up the story, “ and he went straight from Charing Cross terminus to her diggings, and was told she had just gone out in a carriage with a gentleman, on business. It was hours earlier than she was accustomed to be up and about, and he knew it meant something serious. The servant told him that she and the gentleman were expected back in half an hour, and she’d got breakfast ready for them, and they were leaving for the Continent in the afternoon. He saw her trunks in the hall, the monster dress-baskets and hat-boxes with the Monte Carlo hotel labels plastered over them. There was another trunk, brand new, with new initials upon it. The girl told him the gentleman was Mr. Blastwick, and she believed they were gone to the Registrar’s to be married.”

“‘ Stolen waters are sweet,’ ” pursued the chorus ; “‘ but he knoweth not that the dead are there ; and that her guests are in the depths of hell.’ ”

“ Shut up,” cried O’Neil. “ All your scriptural stock-in-trade is a few verses of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.”

"I mean to do a pre-Raphaelite series. The Wanton Woman of Holy Writ, after Tissot."

"After the Millennium, I hope," said his brother.

"Mr. and Mrs. Blastwick came in while the servant girl was talking, and you can guess the rest. Randolph made a scene, and got himself chucked out by Blastwick, who began life as a navvy and made no more of putting that poor creature outside the door than if he'd been a stray kitten. And the wretched man came to us and raved about his wrongs, and cursed the woman who had thrown him over, after he'd wasted all his money on her and on that damned gambling-house. How he came by the money I can't understand—he talked of twenty thousand pounds that had run through his fingers like water."

"It's my belief that he was stark mad, and that there never was any money—that she had been paying for him," said Matthew.

"No, no ; he had the money," said Desmond.

"She pay ! " cried Luke ; "when do *they* ever pay ? ' Remove thy way far from her and come not nigh the door of her house.' "

"We did all we could to quiet him, and we tried to make him eat something. He told us he had had nothing but a ship's biscuit since he left Monte Carlo. He was dead beat."

"He asked me if I'd let him lie down in my flat," continued O'Neil, "where he could be quiet, while I went to the hospital, and I said yes, and went across with him. He wanted to lie on the sofa in my workshop ; but I wasn't going to leave him with the means of death within his reach ; so I told him he would be more comfortable in my bedroom, and I made him lie on my bed, and I covered him with a rug, and I told him to try and get a good long sleep. I gave him a sedative, and I talked to him as cheerfully as I could, though remembering what

had passed between you and me, I couldn't be as I had been with him. There was that hideous suspicion of yours at the back of my mind. I tried to make him comfortable, not thinking of him as my old school-fellow and chum, but as I might have thought of a patient at the hospital. And when I had seen him drop asleep, or at any rate seem to sleep, for he might have been shamming, I crept out of the room and locked the door, making him safe from any attempt to get at poison among my drugs. I didn't know of the revolver."

"Did he shoot himself?"

"Yes," answered Matthew; "he meant to make an end of himself from the moment he knew of her marriage. That was in his mind when he came to us. I can recall things he said while he was raving and blaspheming, though I took no particular note of his words in that hurricane of frantic talk, his broken heart, her treachery, her lying promises, the sacrifices he had made, the guilty things he had done for her sake. I ought to have known that a man would hardly give himself away like that unless he meant to make a finish."

Luke took up the story.

"It was three hours after O'Neil left the building that we heard a shot fired. There was no mistake as to the direction it came from; but Pat had locked his door when he went out, and there was no getting in without breaking it open, or fetching him from the hospital. So Luke took a hansom and drove there as fast as a game driver could get a rather dangerous horse to go, and brought Pat home—and then—well, there's no use expatiating upon horrible things. He had blown out his brains. I suppose the sedative gave him two or three hours' sleep, but the sleep didn't change his purpose. He meant to kill himself, and he did it. I think it was the only resolute thing I ever knew him do. Luke went for a policeman before the door was opened,

and everything was done that ought to be done. The body will be moved to the mortuary at ten o'clock—an hour and a half from now," glancing at the painted Dutch clock on the wall, "and I believe the inquest will take place to-morrow."

"Does his father know?"

"He may by this time," answered O'Neil. "I went to Daneborough Gardens before I wired to you, but Captain Hammond was out, not expected home till dinner-time. I saw Mrs. Hammond, but I didn't want to scare her with the horrible facts, so I told her that her stepson had been taken ill at my place, and asked her to send his father as soon as she could. He ought to be here soon."

"Will there be any report in the morning papers, do you think?" Desmond asked, dreading the shock for Mrs. Warden and Muriel.

"No, I don't believe there'll be anything in the papers till after the inquest. Everything has been kept quiet in this house, and the porter has promised not to answer any questions. Even he does not know the name of the man who is dead."

The bell of the outer door rang, and Matthew went to open it, admitting a man who announced himself agitatedly as Captain Hammond.

"I have come to look after my son," he said. "I was told he had been taken seriously ill here."

He looked about the room, confused at the sight of the four men. Three of them had been occasional visitors at his house, and he had some slight acquaintance with them as his son's friends, but he looked at them with a dazed air, agitated by shapeless fears.

"Yes, it is very serious," O'Neil answered in a low voice. "Will you come across to my rooms, Captain Hammond? I'll tell you all about it."

"Is he—is he very bad?"

"Hopelessly. You must prepare yourself for the worst."

Hammond looked at him, awe-stricken, but said no word, as he followed him out of the room.

“ His only son,” said Matthew.

“ Do you think he ever cared much for him ? ” questioned Luke.

“ He’ll care for him now he’s dead. That’s where retribution comes in for neglectful fathers.”

It was a considerable time before the two men came back, the elder still silent. His passion of grief and horror had passed, but there were traces of tears upon his reddened eyelids, and his mouth was faintly tremulous as he dropped into a chair by the hearth. He sat there some minutes, staring at the smouldering logs, before he spoke, and then his speech betrayed the unconquerable habit of the man whose thoughts are self-centred.

“ He might have had some pity for his mother and me, if he had no pity for himself,” he said. “ God knows how fond she was of him ; but he was never grateful to her, and he was never fond of his home. Still, he was my son—my only son—and I was proud of him, even after he’d dished himself for the army. Such chances as he had, one of the cleverest army-crammers in England. But he wouldn’t work. He always looked to his grandmother to make him a rich man. She was the ruin of him.”

Presently, after another lapse into silence, he lifted his eyes and saw an unremembered face looking at him.

“ I didn’t know there was a stranger here.”

“ I am no stranger to your family, Captain Hammond. I came from Lorringford this afternoon, and I am going to Bournemouth to-morrow morning as early as I can, to break this dreadful news to Mrs. Warden before she can read it in a newspaper.”

“ Oh, you are the secretary, I suppose, the man Randolph used to talk of. I don’t think you were over kind to my poor boy, Mr.—Mr.—”

"My name is Desmond. I had no opportunity of being kind or unkind. It happened that your son and I were not in sympathy. That was all."

"I suppose you were afraid he might put a spoke in your wheel. Well, you see, he's dead—young, handsome, and with the chance of half a million, if his grandmother played fair. He's dead! Whatever grudge you have had against him, you can't hurt him now. He's safe."

"I never had a grudge against him, and I am very sorry for him and for you," Desmond answered gravely, as he took up his hat and moved towards the door. "I am not going to quarrel with you, Captain Hammond, at such a time as this, however uncivil you may choose to be."

"Well, tell your employer that she has contrived to spoil her grandson's life with her high-flown jabber about hard work and Rhodesian tobacco fields. My son was a gentleman, not a pauper-emigrant."

Desmond shook hands hurriedly with the two Bowdens, and left the studio, O'Neil going with him. His last glance at the dejected figure by the hearth showed him the slouching frame that had once been athletic and well set-up, the weak face that had once been handsome, the miserable wreck of a man.

It was half-past ten when he found himself in the street, a late hour at which to call upon a famous doctor; but Desmond felt that he ought to consult Sir Julius Martley before he told Mrs. Warden the story of her grandson's tragical end. She would have to know, and the knowledge must be conveyed to her without loss of time, since the report of the inquest could hardly fail to appear in to-morrow's evening papers "Shocking suicide in a chemist's laboratory." "Tragic fate of a cavalry officer's son." Somehow or other the gruesome dish would be served up to the million that loves to sup upon the horrors that happen to other people.

A hansom took Desmond to Harley Street in a quarter of an hour. It was not eleven o'clock when the physician's massive door was opened to him, and a sound of cheerful voices and a waft of choice tobacco came to him from the dining-room.

A great doctor is seldom inaccessible, and with a deprecatory remark that Sir Julius had friends dining with him, the grave butler led the way to a spacious room at the back of the house, sombre and deeply shadowed in the light of a single electric lamp, switched on as he entered, a room of carved oak and dark green morocco, with tall cabinets projecting monstrous shadows on the pale green wall, a room of terror, Desmond thought, to the hapless soul entering there on that last despairing quest of the doctor who can do battle with Death.

Sir Julius came promptly on hearing the name of his visitor.

"Nothing amiss at Bournemouth, I hope," he said.

Desmond told him what had happened, briefly, without details.

"Unfortunate young man! He has done the best for his people, for now they need never know what a bad lot he was."

"I have been thinking of that. It is an escape for those two tender-hearted women, who would have suffered horribly."

"Yes, he has done the best thing for them; and with my knowledge of his temperament and feeble brain-power, I believe he has done the best thing for himself. He was foredoomed to a bad history. We ought not to be sorry that it was short."

"A bad woman——" Desmond began deprecatingly.

"Bad women seldom ruin good men," Sir Julius said severely. "There is a natural antagonism between them. Well, you are the best person to break this ghastly news to Mrs. Warden. She

likes you and trusts you. I know you'll do the thing as gently as it can be done. She will be shocked ; she will be greatly distressed ; but she has a powerful brain and a fine constitution. She'll get over it. Don't let the newspapers anticipate you."

"I shall go to Bournemouth by the first train. Good-night, Sir Julius, and thank you for seeing me at such an inconvenient hour," Desmond said, as he went through the hall with the doctor.

"Do you suppose I'm not used to inconvenient hours ? Drop me a line to say how those poor women stand the shock. Good-night."

The door closed upon Desmond, who was beginning to feel worn out. He drove to a useful and unpretentious hotel hard by Waterloo Station, and told the Boots to call him in good time for the first Bournemouth express.

Mrs. Warden and Muriel were at breakfast in one of the prettiest sitting-rooms at the "Bath Hotel," a ground-floor room opening into a garden, the windows wide open to the exquisite spring morning, the sun shining upon the silent sea. It was ten o'clock, Grannie not being allowed to breakfast earlier, and they had only been seated for a few minutes when Desmond was announced. There was nothing surprising in his visit except the early hour, and Mrs. Warden showed no sign of alarm.

"I had your letter and enclosures an hour ago," she told him, after she had made him seat himself at the breakfast-table. "Will you take tea or coffee ? You must look after him, Muriel. But perhaps you have had your breakfast."

"I shall be very glad of some coffee. I have had nothing but a cup of boiling tea at Waterloo."

"What ! have you come from London this morning ? I thought you must have run down last night."

Muriel was pouring out coffee for him, with the lofty air she had assumed since his hard words about Randolph. Mrs. Warden looked at him with a puzzled expression.

"You said nothing in your letter about coming here," she said.

"My letter was written before I knew that I had to come."

Muriel's haughty air changed instantaneously to pale fear.

"You had to come!" she echoed. "You have brought us bad news."

"Yes, I have brought bad news—for Mrs. Warden. Will you come into the garden for a few minutes," he asked, having suddenly decided on breaking that awful news to the elder woman, as far better able to bear the blow than the younger one, in spite of her recent illness.

She could not have lived in the world so long without having known the horrible things of life—the social tragedies, the sudden disasters, the human shipwrecks.

"Why don't you tell us what it is?" cried Muriel distractedly. "I know that it is about Randolph. You hate him, and you don't mind if he is ill, or unhappy. But he is my brother, and I have the right to know."

Mrs. Warden hurried him out through the wide-open French window.

"Tell me this instant," she said. "Whatever it is, I can bear it. There has been a railway accident, a Channel steamer wrecked, some frightful catastrophe, and Randolph was in it. Poor unlucky lad!"

"There has been no accident, but the wreck of a young man's life," Desmond said gravely.

And then, slowly and with extreme gentleness, watching the effect of every word, he told her the thing that had happened—a life flung away in a

paroxysm of despair, an unhappy life, blighted by the influence of an unprincipled woman. He made excuses for the dead. He called his act madness and not suicide.

"There can be no doubt as to the verdict," he said. "His friends' evidence will show that he was not responsible for his actions."

And then, as they turned at the end of the garden walk and saw Muriel coming towards them with a distracted countenance, Desmond said gently :

"You will make the tragedy as easy for her as you can. I will come back in the afternoon to hear if there is anything you want done. We shall know the result of the inquest by that time, and what steps Captain Hammond may have taken about the funeral."

"The funeral," Mrs. Warden echoed sorrowfully. "Randolph's funeral ! And I am walking here—I, who was at death's door little more than a month ago. Randolph's funeral ! This life seems out of joint when the young go first."

Desmond left her by a gate that opened on the cliff. He went to another hotel to eat his breakfast, and then, worn out with yesterday's agitations, a sleepless night, and an early journey, he fell asleep on a sofa in the smoking-room and lost himself in a labyrinth where Vera and Vera's father appeared in the fantastic shapes that dream-shadows wear, phantoms that the dreamer sees without question, almost without wonder.

It was nearly one o'clock in the afternoon when he awoke from the sleep of exhaustion, and he hurried to the post-office, where he had asked O'Neil to address a telegram directly after the inquest.

"Inquest over, suicide while of unsound mind. Funeral at Brompton Cemetery, the day after to-morrow."

He carried this message to Mrs. Warden, whom

he found alone. Muriel was shut in her bedroom, grief-stricken.

"He was never an affectionate brother, and their lives were mostly spent apart ; but, after all, he was her brother, and it is only natural that she should grieve for him. And then the shock of such a horrible end made things so much worse. I had to tell her the cruel truth. There was no use in hiding it for a few hours. One of those dreadful newspapers would come into her hands sooner or later. And then she is too intelligent to be satisfied with any lame story of sudden death from heart failure. It was inevitable that she should know the truth about him—poor, unhappy lad ! "

Desmond thought of that dreadful secret which these two women need never know, that history of a man without conscience and without heart, which was to have been revealed to them. That knowledge might now be spared them, and they could think of the dead with pity and without aversion. He would never be known to them as the secret assassin, the man whose brain could deliberately plot the murder of his nearest and dearest, for the sake of those base things that gold can buy, unable to comprehend that the most precious things in life are those for which there is neither market nor price.

Self-destruction in an hour of wild, despairing fury was perhaps not the worst fate that could have overtaken Randolph Hammond, if Sir Julius Martley's diagnosis was correct. The criminal instinct must have been strong in a man who at two-and-twenty had gone as far as Randolph had gone.

Mrs. Warden gave her secretary full instructions. He was to write to Captain Hammond on her part, offering to pay all funeral expenses. He was to make Patrick O'Neil liberal compensation for the

pain and trouble that her grandson's tragic death had caused. If his rooms had been made abhorrent to him by that ghastly scene she would gladly pay all charges for his installation in new quarters.

She asked Desmond to attend the funeral as her representative, and to order a plain marble cross, with an inscription that she would send him when she was able to think more calmly.

"I shall not send any flowers," she said. "They would seem a mockery in such painful circumstances; but I should not like the poor lad to lie in a nameless grave."

Desmond had just time to get to the station and jump into the London train that left a few minutes after two. He would be in London before five, and with luck he might be at the lock-house before seven. And then perhaps he would know his fate—that fate which seemed to have been in abeyance for ages since he registered his packet at the little rural post-office, where a registered letter was almost an event.



Now for the first time he was able to think exclusively of himself and the destiny that trembled in the balance. The question was not whether he was to renounce the woman he loved, to win whom had been the end and aim of his life ever since that grey November morning, when she ran away from him at the church door in that high world among the clouds. The question was whether he was to win her happily and peacefully, without pain or sacrifice on her part, with no after-taste of remorse mixed with the joy of wedded love; or whether he was to be obliged to fight for her, defying father, friends, opinions, winning her, as it were, at the sword's point.

It was a question upon which so much of her happiness depended, that it needs must be a vital question for him.

And now that he was free to thrust aside the

dreadful image of Randolph's despair, he found it almost difficult to believe that it was not two days since he had posted his letter to Vera. There seemed an abyss of time since he had been sitting between father and daughter at Foxcose in the fireglow and the scent of greenhouse plants, Vera pouring out tea for him and the old man full of friendly talk. Walking at almost sporting pace from the station to his lodgings, he was wild with impatience for the tidings that might be waiting for him there. Surely there must have been sufficient time for Sir Emanuel to have read the report and pronounced judgment, and for Vera to have sent him the result.

Yes, there was a letter for him, a lilliputian letter, a mere "chit." If it contained bad news, she had taken no trouble to soften the blow. That diminutive envelope could hold few words of consolation or love.

He tore it open almost angrily, and found, as once before, after agitating moments, an invitation to dinner.

"DEAR MR. DESMOND,—

"My father tells me to ask you to give him the pleasure of your company at dinner at eight o'clock to-morrow evening, if you have nothing better to do. We shall be quite alone.

"Faithfully yours,

"VERA PENROYAL.

"P.S.—He has read the report."

That was all! Could there be any better way of telling him that the kind old man believed his story, and that he was still to be considered a friend, nay, even to be admitted to a closer intimacy, implied by the invitation to dine as the only guest, the familiar friend, welcome to the hearth in the close propinquity of the home-life.

He dashed out of the house, half-choked by a sob of glad surprise, and walked the river path for a quarter of an hour, in an ecstatic reverie, then sculled himself across to the village, and telegraphed his reply :

“Sir Emanuel’s kindest invitation accepted with delight.”

It was past eight when he went back to the lock-house, to be gently chidden by his kind landlady, who had taken extra pains with his dinner on account of his having missed that meal yesterday.

“But you look a bit fussed, sir, and I’m afraid you won’t do justice to a sweet little neck of lamb and some early sparrowgrass,” she said, full of sympathy.

“Give me a quarter of an hour to change, and I promise to eat like a famished hunter,” he answered gaily, as he rushed up the steep staircase.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

THAT dinner of three, where love was at the sparkling table, full of light and flowers and quaint old silver, and quainter Wedgwood, was a banquet to remember as the something ineffably sweet that could never repeat itself. The round table had shrunk to its smallest dimensions, and Vera and her unavowed lover sat on each side of Sir Emanuel, who was in excellent spirits, and who did most of the talking, and whose principal theme was Desmond's book.

He was not minutely posted in the history of those blood-stained years, that tiger-like struggle of an oppressed people against an effete aristocracy, but he knew enough of the men and the things they had done to sustain his interest in Desmond's story. And when Danton and Marat, Robespierre and St. Just, the September massacres, the fate of the Girondists, had been discussed, Sir Emanuel's mind went back to his favourite subject.

"I would ask you, Desmond, how much the immeasurable ages, years reckoned by thousands and tens of thousands, had done for man? How much more intelligence was there in the men who made the Princess de Lamballe's murdered head look in at the Queen's window, and would not be appeased till their living victim had seen the face of her dead friend, than in the men who hunted the reindeer and the mammoth while mankind was a new species? The human brain may have developed knowledge and the human hand may have attained

constructive skill, but the human heart is no better. Civilization has done nothing for that. Cæsar Borgia yesterday, William Palmer to-day. The civilized centuries roll by and make no difference, and the vast spaces of primeval time would show us no variety, could we conjure back the life-history of the men whose bones we find with the extinct rhinoceros and the cave lion."

Vera hoped her dear father did not think that all mankind were wicked.

"Not all wicked, but in all ages the same."

And then he pressed upon Desmond that scheme of a palæolithic novel. He had imagined the outline of a Stone-age story, and he was eloquent about the Stone-man, expert in the chase, fearless amidst creatures of appalling force, and the Stone-woman, a being of exquisite simplicity, with no feminine vanities, and with not even a clay cooking-pot—elemental man and elemental woman.

This monologue lasted till Vera left them, when Sir Emanuel bade Desmond turn his chair to the fire and light a cigarette.

"Now, my dear fellow, let us talk of to-day, and of ourselves," he said.

And then he went on to tell Desmond in his own leisurely manner, that he had read and carefully considered the report of the trial, and that it was his opinion that the jury had been entirely wrong when they included the son in the guilt of the father and his accomplices.

"I believe that the evidence before them was insufficient, and that, had you been standing in the dock alone, you would not have been found guilty. But you were one of a gang who had almost succeeded in a gigantic fraud; who had, indeed, possessed themselves of large sums of money that had not been recovered by the police who hunted them down, and the prejudice was strong against you as an instrument in that fraud."

And then after a thoughtful pause, he continued gravely :

“ If the evidence before the jury should have weighed in your favour, I have other evidence before me I have the evidence of your antecedents, and I cannot conceive that a young man educated at Eton and at Balliol, and who took a good degree under difficult conditions, would fall at once into crime. *Nemo repente*, you know, Desmond And then I have the evidence of your character as I find it revealed in your first book, and even in your second, though that is more impersonal. There are pages that emanate from a lofty soul, thoughts that could not live in the mind of a common thief. The judge told the jury that there was reasonable ground for doubt. I tell myself that I am safe in believing that you were a victim and not a felon.”

“ Oh, sir, if you knew how heavy a load you have lifted from my heart.”

“ I think I do know. You took an uncommon course in submitting your past history to my judgment. You must have had an uncommon reason.”

“ You had been too kind to me for me to leave you in the dark. I could not cheat you out of your friendship.”

“ But you have not told Mrs. Warden. You do not mind cheating her ! ”

“ I am Mrs. Warden’s paid secretary. I give her just measure—so much work for so much money. I felt under no obligation to tear the bandage off my wounds, to show them to her.”

“ Would you have left her in the dark if you had been in love with her granddaughter ? ”

“ No, no ; that would have altered the case. Happily, Miss Hammond has never been more to me than a pretty and amiable girl.”

“ But you were impelled to give me your con-

fidence. "Come, Desmond, there must have been some deeper motive; something more precious at stake than an old man's friendship."

"Yes, there was something else," George Desmond answered gravely, pale with the effort to be calm.

"You are in love with my daughter?"

"I love her—as we are taught to love God—with all my heart, with all my mind, with all my soul."

"After I had read the trial, Vera told me her girlish romance, and how she had aided your escape. It is a touching story, and I should be sorry if I were obliged to spoil it."

"I am at your feet, Sir Emanuel. Deal with me mercifully, if you can. I have never spoken of love to your daughter—but I think she knows that I adore her—and I think—"

"You think she loves you? So do I, though she has not breathed a word of her love in her talk with me. But when I saw her watching me as I read that report, when I saw her tremulous anxiety, her eyes heavy with tears, well—the woman of the Stone age would have been about as able to conceal her feelings. My poor child's heart was like an open book."

"And will you be kind? Will you let me hope?"

"Yes, I will let you hope; but there must be no certainty, no betrothal, no talk of love on your part, till I have known you a good deal longer, and have more warrant for believing in you. I have spent the best years of my life among a handful of rustics. Books and the vestiges of antiquity have been my chief companions. I am not a man of the world. I suppose I might very easily be taken in; but my knowledge of literature has taught me that no man can write a book without self-revelation; that the book and the man will be of the same stuff, and that in the most exquisite prose that pen

ever wrote the cloven hoof will show if the cloven hoof is there. We know the licentious devil that grins at us from Sterne's inimitable book, and we know what kind of man, cleric, husband, father, Laurence Sterne was. We know the man Goldsmith in the unsmirched page we love."

And then, after a pause, Sir Emanuel continued, with ineffable sweetness :

"Come to us as our friend, and come often. Do not talk to Vera of your love. Be patient and restrained, as you have been heretofore. I believe you have a brilliant career before you in that new world of modern literature, which is a strange country for me. Go on with your delightful art. And if, when we have known each other for another year, my opinion of your character is unaltered, I shall be proud of such a son-in-law."

Some broken words of gratitude and affection were all that Desmond could manage. He was too deeply moved for fluent speech.

"Give yourself no anxiety about ways and means. Do not write with a view to gain. I am told that imaginative literature is a profitable kind of ware, if successful in pleasing the multitude. But let your aim be higher than pounds, shillings and pence. If, a year hence, I can give you my daughter, I should like you to live under this roof. The house is more than large enough to hold us all three, and as I spend the greater part of my days alone, you would not be too much bored by my company. Leonard has told me that when he leaves Oxford he must live in London, where he can do the work he loves and mix with the men he admires. Poor, dear Leonard ! He is nothing if not scientific, but it is the new science, electricity, radium, new atomic theories. He does not care twopence for the story of creation, the making of man. We will let him be happy in his own way. He shall have a house in Harley Street, and his

laboratory and electrical nonsense. He will never marry, I take it. Science is a jealous mistress."

"I doubt if he will forego a wife for her sake," Desmond said, radiant with happiness, and wanting other people to be happy. "I am inclined to think that he is rather fond of Muriel Hammond. She is very pretty and engaging, and quite intelligent—"

"Intelligent enough to admire him, do you mean? That is all he would want. But she is something of an heiress, is she not?"

"Her grandmother has thirty thousand a year, and circumstances of the saddest nature have made Muriel her only heir."

And then Desmond told Sir Emanuel of Randolph's tragic death, as briefly and with as much charity as he could find for that miserable man. He spoke of a woman's pernicious influence, suicide in an hour of jealous rage.

"He had been badly used by an unprincipled woman, and he was much to be pitied," he concluded. Sir Emanuel asked for no details.

"Leonard and Vera have talked of the young man," he said; "but I don't think either of them liked him."

After a pause he went on musingly:

"Then you think my son is in love with this girl?"

"I have seen unmistakable signs of his subjugation, though he takes a high hand with the young lady."

"That is Leonard's way. He is of the conquering type. In the Stone age he would have killed the biggest mammoth; he would have appropriated the most commodious cave. Vera has nothing but praise for Miss Hammond's prettiness and sweetness. And though I should hate my son if his feelings could be influenced by money, there is nothing disagreeable in thirty thousand

a year. Leonard would know what to do with it. Radium is an expensive plaything. And let us hope it may be long before the girl comes into her fortune. Old people wear well nowadays. It is not wise for youth to build its hopes upon a grandmother's death. But Leonard is not that kind of man. He wants to make name and fortune for himself, and in any case he will be fairly well off. And now let us go to Vera. She will have wondered what we could find to talk about all this time."

The plaintive melody of the first number in the first book of Mendelssohn's "Lieder ohne Worte" met them on their way to the drawing-room, and Vera started up from the piano as they entered the room, and came to her father, radiant with unspoken bliss. She knew that all was well. Her convict had played the bold, open game. He had risked all to win all ; and he had won.

The year sped by on joyous wings—a year of perfect happiness for Vera and Desmond, though his promise was kept religiously, and no word of love was spoken, no stolen kiss revealed the lover in the guise of the friend. Ferdinand was not more reverential, Miranda not more chaste. Friendship pure and supreme was their only commerce. Trust, sympathy, a perfect understanding of each other's thoughts, and principles, and taste, an unconcealed delight in each other's society, sufficed for happiness.

Vera asked no questions. Perhaps she may have told herself that a young man who was allowed to come to her father's house as often as he liked, and was always cordially welcomed as a friend, could hardly be distasteful as a son-in-law ; but she possessed her soul in patience, with implicit faith in the father whose kindness had never failed her.

For Muriel, when the sharp grief of her brother's untimely and dreadful end had been mitigated by

Time, the year was one of happiness. Time for a mourner of eighteen means about a quarter of a year, and when the June roses began to fill the gardens with delight, it seemed to Muriel that ages had gone by since those dreadful days at Bournemouth, when she had lain on her bed sobbing heart-brokenly for her brother's hard fate, cherishing her grief rather than trying to outlive it ; full of remorse because she had not loved him well enough ; had not been a good sister ; had suffered herself to be repelled by trivial sins of manner, by disagreeable speeches, by unpleasantness which she told herself now in her despairing sorrow, only amounted to "a young man's way."

"I made too much of every little offence. I was always preaching and lecturing him. And now he is gone, and I can never—never—never—tell him I am sorry."

Never—unless it were in the better world, the world we all hope for, where it would seem as if kinsfolk and friends would be all occupied in asking for forgiveness, in pouring out their pitiful story of the deep, regretful love and the remorse that came too late.

Ages had gone by—ages measured by a girl's feelings, and Muriel was happy again. Indeed, she was not allowed any morbid cherishing of a futile sorrow, for Leonard Penroyal had done with the 'Varsity, after taking a tremendous degree, and he was now at liberty to spend the best part of his days at Lorrington, except when Muriel was staying at Foxcose. Leonard was her master as well as her lover, accepted cordially by Mrs. Warden, and highly approved by Mrs. Lavington, whose sole desire on behalf of Muriel was that she should marry into Debrett, and live in the parish.

It was a disappointment to hear that Leonard had set his heart upon Harley Street, and that the young couple would pitch their tent in London.

"That is to say, their headquarters will be in London, but, of course, they will spend at least half the year with me," Mrs. Warden said complacently. "And you must remember, dear Mrs. Lavington, Muriel is only eighteen, and the marriage is not to take place for ages."

Ages in this case meant a year. That was to be the irreducible minimum. The wedding was not to be till a year after the day on which these two young lives were pledged to spend themselves together; by which time Muriel would be nineteen and a quarter.

Vera, from her grave age of rising twenty-three, thought it was much too young.

"How do you know you mayn't meet someone you would like better than my brother?" she asked, more in sport than in earnest.

"As if I could change!" exclaimed Muriel, and then she blushed a sudden crimson, remembering how she had changed.

"But I was little more than a child then," she thought, excusing herself.

The year waxed. A year is so short a span for happy lovers, happy and secure in each other's love, though unavowed. It seemed more exquisite, perhaps, for being unspoken. A thrilling secret that each knew and pretended not to know.

The year waned. Desmond's book had "caught on." It had made one of those popular hits for which other novelists are at a loss to understand the reason. He had chosen a page of history that everybody had supposed worn threadbare, mere dust and ashes, used to the bone in romance and drama, in the latter art counted even as unlucky, a period that spells bankruptcy.

He had taken the old familiar figures and had breathed life into them, just as a modern romancer took the dry bones of Mary Stuart's dismal story

and clothed them with flesh, and brought the clamour and strife and savagery of old Edinburgh *wynds* and *closes* into his pages.

The familiar became strange and new in the glamour of Desmond's romantic dreams. He pictured not alone the dire tragedy, but the grim humour of a time in which the very dregs and off-scouring of the nation had thrust itself into the front of life. He had read himself and thought himself into that ghastly epoch until he lived in it, and could write of it as if he had rubbed shoulders with Mirabeau and drunk with Marat and his rabble following, and had seen Charlotte Corday going serene and steadfast to her doom, happy in having rid the world of a tyrant.

He conjured with words and made the dead alive. His pen brought back the tumult and the horror, tragedies too pitiful for tears—the agonies of mothers and children, of husbands and wives ; the foolish revelry upon the edge of the grave ; the pity of rude jailers ; the rabid hatred of demagogues ; the devotion of highborn servants willing to die for their king—treachery, fidelity, love, hate ; the trivial vanity of underlings perked up in brief authority ; greed of power and greed of gain, and the mad fury that knows not why it rages.

And through the clash and tumult of the time moved in heavenly calm and almost supernatural power his Angel of Mercy, strong to come between despair and death, to snatch a life from the scaffold ; invincible by the might of splendid courage and inexhaustible pity. There was exaggeration, no doubt. The pencil that limned the lurid picture was a daring pencil ; the high lights were perhaps impossible ; but the passion of the writer, the intensity of his feeling, carried his readers along with him. He made them see ; he made them believe. His novel was not only the book of the year, but the most triumphant success of a decade.

It brought him substantial fortune, as well as fame, and it was not as a pauper that he began the golden years of his life.

It was something less than a year after his compact with Sir Emanuel that the kind old man gave him his reward.

“ You have kept our bond faithfully,” he said, “ and I am not going to spring a Leah, in the shape of difficulty or delay, upon you after your honourable dealing with me. You shall have your Rachel. Go to her and tell her that if you are her choice you are her father’s choice also, and that my son-in-law shall be to me as a son.”

It was in a wintry garden that he found Vera, a garden where silvery snowdrops coldly fringed the short smooth grass under an iron sky, but to those two it was more golden than the garden of the Hesperides.

“ When did I begin to love you ? ” Vera said musingly, in answer to a foolish question. “ How can I tell ? I know that I used to think of you very often after that November morning, and I would have given worlds to know how you had fared, and where you were living, and what you were doing. I used to dream of you sometimes, terrible dreams, in which I saw you in dreadful trouble—perhaps ill, dying—or foolish dreams in which you were some preposterous person—an archbishop, or a prime minister. I used to imagine our meeting some day—and your surprise. And when we did meet—it was the happiest hour of my life.”

“ My Angel of Mercy ! Five years of misery seem but as a day when I think that the end of them was to bring you to my arms.”



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